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LINDSAY SYMINGTON
1907



For My Name's Sake;

Gaston Bascle de Lagrèze, Lilian Marian Leggatt



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Basile

FOR MY NAME'S SAKE

For My Name's Sake

TRANSLATED BY
L. M. LEGGATT

FROM THE FRENCH
OF
CHAMPOL'S "SŒUR ALEXANDRINE"

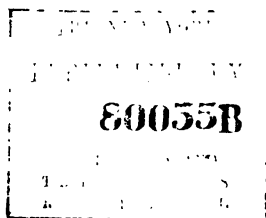
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FOR MY NAME'S SAKE

CHAPTER I

COTTARD'S LODGING-HOUSE

SISTER ALEXANDRINE crossed the court quickly with a large parcel under her arm. Her square figure in its grey frieze dress looked sexless, her wrinkled face under its white head-dress might have been of any age, and still she was wholesome and pleasing to behold, with her bright eyes, her intelligently smiling mouth, and that look of robust serenity and unselfishness, which, when it becomes a habit, pervades even the exterior, and strikes the most inveterate egoist.

Sister Alexandrine was well known in this house in the Rue Buci, as she was in all the poor houses in the neighbourhood. The concierge nodded to her ; young men in shirt-sleeves nailing down packing cases,

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washerwomen leaning over their tubs, threw her a friendly glance as she passed. The only person who pretended not to see her was the landlady, Madame Cottard, sitting at her ground-floor window, her head, with its wide, bald, partings, bent over the newspaper. But she had been the first to recognise the Sister from afar, as she saw through her spectacles every thing and person that came into her house.

Sister Alexandrine was already inside, and quickly ascending the dark and narrow staircase with its indescribable defilements. There was every horror in the uneven surface that covered the old wooden stairs: mud rubbed in by the forty lodgers who occupied Madame Cottard's eight sets of rooms; coal dropped in carrying up, vegetable parings, scraps of *poubelle*¹ waste paper, rags dropped by children, plasterers' dust, wood-shavings, tobacco, saliva, microbes, all the accumulated squalor of perhaps a century.

The house deteriorated steadily, each fresh set of inhabitants were poorer and poorer, and each succeeding existence ploughed its

¹ "From *Poubelle*, a Commissaire de Police, who arranged for the removal of waste paper."—Translator's note.



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mark in a black furrow. On a hot July day all this loathsomeness was aggravated by the want of air and the smells which arose; without a single ray of sunshine throwing its joyous and healthy light on the leprous walls. Sister Alexandrine had acquired the art of passing scatheless everywhere, without a stain on her scrupulously clean habit, the old habit of the Sisters of La Providence; without a cloud on the brave cheerfulness which seems as traditional in the Order as the costume.

She stopped, as if quite at home, to speak to a child of five or six who was pattering about on the second-floor landing, a space of about six square yards.

"What are you doing? If you're not wanted indoors, go down into the court, at least you will be in the open air. Where are the others?" She raised her head and perceived the others on the stairs—a girl of about twelve, livid and shadowy in the half light, who was leaning over to look down, and another younger one who was amusing herself by pushing her ill-kempt head through the bannisters. "Come down," called the Sister firmly, "now, then, in or out with you."

She knew the dangers of these Paris houses,

whose darkest and most secret corners she had penetrated for forty years. The courtyard was safest, where meetings were public, and even Madame Cottard's spectacles could play a useful part. 'The children slowly and unwillingly went down. They were cramped in their narrow lodging, and yet had not the instinct to seek fresh air and daylight. Such sordidly miserable families were shy of meeting the neighbour's decent poverty; they were a race of gutter cats, night owls, sewer rats.

Sister Alexandrine penetrated into one of the dens. It was not necessary to knock—Régine Bréchet, the eldest of seven orphans, had an incorrigible trick of leaving the door open, and in this heat it was almost excusable. The great, tall girl had an exhausted air as she sat in the draught of the window in a shrunken skirt and dressing-jacket, leaving her sewing every moment to shake off her little idiot brother Louis, who kept pulling her sleeve.

Before she went in the Sister paused a moment to look at the tired, pert profile of the Paris work-girl under its unnatural-looking erection of fair hair, held in place by sham tortoiseshell combs. The girl, though

almost in rags, must have spent nearly an hour over the edifice; her great pride and temptation was the magnificent fair hair which attracted all eyes and was enough to make great ladies jealous—great ladies, aye, and the beautiful creatures with houses, carriages, and coachmen of their own, who sometimes began as low down as Régine, and had only her chances of success.

“Good afternoon, my little Régine,” said the Sister as she entered.

The spell was broken, the dreamy eyes became life-like, Régine jumped up, lifting her arms with a joyful, child-like movement.

“Just the person I wanted to see; would you believe I was going to see you this morning, Sister?”

“Well, why didn’t you come?” The Sister took the chair Régine forgot to, offer and caressed little Louis, who buzzed round her like an importunate fly. She noticed how the girl’s face clouded over as she answered—

“I’ve never been to your ‘show’; you know I don’t go in for that kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Oh! all your fads, your Congregations and Sodalities and blue ribbons—that’s not my style. I’m not going to turn ‘pi.’”

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"Do you think any one would force you to be?"

"No, but all the same—" Régine did not further explain the vague suspicion thrown, she hardly knew from whence, into her bewildered soul.

"At that rate, you ought to beware of me too," said Sister Alexandrine with a smile.

"Oh, you!" said the girl heartily. "I know you; you're all right; besides its not the same thing here."

She looked round with a reassured glance at the blackened walls, with their blatant pictures cut out of newspapers or distributed by a hawker, the table still covered with dirty plates and glasses, the father's newspaper and brandy bottle, the cheap glass where she admired her hair, the wardrobe half emptied by the pawnshop, but full of hidden novels lent by companions, the disorder, the shiftlessness, the hopeless, unhealthy poverty in which her youth was stagnating, and from which she dreaded being torn as some of the poor dread a bath even when eaten up by vermin. And she put such faith in the protection of her surroundings, that she did not feel herself being

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penetrated little by little by a wholesome, gentle influence.

"Did you want me for Madeleine?" asked Sister Alexandrine, eager to get to work.

Régine's swollen eyelids showed that she had not slept, and suddenly she burst out complaining :

"She begins at nine in the evening, crying, whining, and kicking about, and that goes on till five o'clock in the morning. Father wakes up and gets into such rages, particularly when he is drunk . . . you'd think he was going to wring her neck. I have barely time to jump out of bed and get between them. So at last I took her to sleep with me ; it isn't pleasant, but it quiets her a little. Come and look at her."

They went together into the little closet of a bedroom. Air and daylight could only get in from the next room ; and all the miasmic vapours of the whole place seemed to be concentrated in the little den, which was filled with old clothes and all the untidy rubbish of the lodging, already bad enough when seen at its best. On one of the three beds touching one another, amongst ragged sheets and old petticoats, could be seen a little red face

with closed eyes ; the nose was covered with sores, and the lips were half open to let out the panting breath. This was the last of the seven Bréchet children—the accumulation of all the defects of the race, a poor wretch born of a drunken father and a mother in the last stages of consumption. The mother had died soon after the child's birth, leaving Régine five brothers and sisters to bring up, in addition to this poor creature sunk in incurable degeneration, and apparently unable to live or die.

Sister Alexandrine uncovered the rickety body which was a mass of boils, and, instead of disgust, had only pity for the sight. "Poor Mite!" The child half opened its swollen eyes, and feeling itself in kind hands, stopped crying. Quickly and deftly Sister Alexandrine bathed her from head to foot with lotion. Then, putting her on Régine's lap, she made up the bed with clean sheets and a little new counterpane out of her big parcel. Then, having replaced the child in bed, she swept up and cleaned the den, took away the empty bottles, the various odds and ends, the microbe-breeding rags, and, coming back into the other room, she went on putting all straight there.

"You oughtn't to take Madeleine to sleep with you ; her illness is catching."

"But she must be looked after, poor brat !"

"She would be much better cared for at the hospital. Shall I try to get her in ?"

Régine drew up her tall figure, and her tired, cynical eyes flashed.

"Never. Mother never let any of us go in, not even when I had typhoid. And as long as I can, I'll do for the baby. When I can't manage any longer ——"

Her gesture seemed to take in all sorts of possible catastrophes, and the Sister felt intuitively that this girl of the people, at once so courageous and so weak, was capable of reaching the heights of self-abnegation. Perhaps the child, though it could contaminate her physically, was her best protection morally. She must be left to Régine, and Régine must be helped "to get along."

"Well, and how are things going ?" asked the Sister.

"As usual, couldn't be worse."

A sarcastic grin wrinkled Régine's thin face. She looked old in a moment, as if all the cares of womanhood were on her eighteen-years-old shoulders.

"Since father was turned off by Monsieur

Chevalier," she went on, "he only works by fits and starts, and what I earn by sewing doesn't keep us. What can I do here with the housework and all the children to look after? Ah, if it weren't for them, if I could only go to the workroom like the others!"

A flush passed over her faded features, but this time it came from the flame of personal longing. The workroom, with companions, gossip, money at the end of the week, and perhaps meetings after work, seemed an Eldorado to her. She shook off little Louis with a rougher hand than usual, as she went on furiously:

"It isn't that I mind working hard, but to think it all ends in nothing, and that all my life will be always the same!"

She looked pitiful in her shrunken jacket and petticoat, sitting with fixed eyes, as if she hesitated between submission and revolt. Sister Alexandrine's cheerful voice broke in:

"Well, my girl, I have been doing the same things for forty years."

Régine looked up with the same hesitation in her eyes. She glanced at the window, the only link with the outer world, but quite tempting enough. You could see the men nailing their packing cases, the plas-

terers making their jokes like a troupe of white powdered clowns, and one could show one's golden hair between two pots of geranium placed on the window-sill to help the effect. Régine's eyes returned to the frieze dress and the white cap.

"You and I are different," she said, as if to excuse any possible comparison; "one doesn't want amusement if one has no cares."

"I with no cares!" cried the Sister, who, before leaving, was unobtrusively emptying her parcel. "But, my poor girl, my head is full of worries, particularly just now. Here's the tenth, and on the fifteenth there are all the rents to pay."

At the sound of "rent," the young girl turned pale; she was recalled to the brutal reality. Sister Alexandrine touched her on the shoulder:

"How much have you got for yours?"

"Nothing, and Madame Cottard is so spiteful. We owe some of last quarter. She'll turn us out, I always thought it would come to that."

Perhaps Régine was waiting for that climax, to disregard finally certain scruples of her own. The Sister gave her a maternal hug:

"Now don't you worry too much over the rent. We'll get it with God's help. I'll come back to-morrow or the day after. Meanwhile, keep this . . . now don't be proud . . . it's to get some little things for the baby . . . I'll send the doctor and I'll get hold of Monsieur Chevalier. He's a good man, and if he hasn't got someone instead of your father, perhaps something can be arranged."

And having done all the good she could for one day, Sister Alexandrine hurried off to fresh troubles. Régine could see her through the ever-open door, beginning to climb the stairs. She guessed her destination.

"She's going to Madame Henry. Well, after all it's wonderful to spend one's days in other people's troubles when one isn't obliged. I slave because I can't help it, and it's for my own people; but why does she work so hard?"

The girl fell into a reverie. But her thoughts did not dwell on the usual subjects, the workmen outside, the gallant grocer who made eyes at her as he tied up his parcels, nor even on the gentleman who stared at her the other day outside a shop window on the boulevard—a real, fashionable gentle-

man, perhaps one of those who give houses, carriages, and diamond necklaces.

Sister Alexandrine did not stop on the third floor. It was occupied by some people called Legrand, who were comfortably off ; the husband accountant in a large drapery establishment, the wife a careful, good manager, and rather envied by the neighbours for her neat appearance. Sister Alexandrine passed her on the stairs, in her fresh, pretty clothes and stylish hat, carrying her youngest baby all in white, who was going out in his little carriage. They nodded to one another. The Legrands were too well behaved to be rude, but they paid no attention to the Sisters, as they need never fear to rank amongst people assisted by charity.

On the left side of the fourth floor lived some of Sister Alexandrine's regular connection—Madame Henry, a widow in very bad health, and her very old mother ; both extremely poor and living on what the elder woman rather pompously called their "savings." The latter opened the door ; a little old woman in a black cap, tidy and decent in spite of all. The room which the Sister entered was also decent, and had

even the faintest shadow of pretension about it, all that remained to the two poor souls, the last undying aroma of better days. The few pieces of furniture were very clean, and over the fireplace, where a mirror had once been, hung a family portrait painted by a sign-painter; and Madame Henry could always look at her "dear departed," smug and prosperous, with a moustache like a blacking brush, bright pink cheeks, and a "dickey" of brilliant white. She sat and gazed at it during her long hours of suffering, sitting on a cane chair in the middle of the room, always in the same position, bent double and resting all the weight of the upper part of her body on the stick which supported her, her head thrown back, with half-open lips, and great protruding black eyes, dilated and almost alarming in her yellow sunken face.

For fifteen years Madame Henry had been a prey to almost continuous attacks of asthma; for fifteen years she had not slept in a bed, gasping night and day in the agony of suffocation, expecting to die from one hour to another, and yet living on. She had survived the loss of her tiny nest-egg (saved when she was a dress-

maker), the death of her husband, and the hopeless daily pressure of poverty and misery. She met all with splendid Christian resignation ; she was even resigned to her obstinate vitality, that survived the scant nursing and the encouragement that she could not rebuff.

"I'm a little better. I'm always the better for seeing you," she said, pressing Sister Alexandrine's hand between her own feverish ones.

The old mother began her long string of lamentations. The attacks were always worse at this time of year—that was natural—wasn't every one breathless? Some Ladies of Charity had called and been very kind. If some others could only be found to take an interest in a poor sick woman! She had an unctuously respectful manner, and spoke in the third person, a reminiscence of the days when her daughter worked for Countesses and Marchionesses. At last she came to the point.

"If Sister would be so good . . . unfortunately all the ladies have left town ; here is the tenth of July, and the fifteenth will soon be here!"

She heaved a deep sigh, to which Sister

Alexandrine responded by a look of understanding. The Henry's rent had long been a standing item in her budget ; and the old woman, set at ease, went back to knit in her corner, leaving Madame Henry to talk in her broken phrases of other subjects.

"Am I detaining you, Sister? I've no one else to talk to. Mother is deaf, and it is so hard for me to speak ; people won't have the patience to follow me."

"Wait a bit," said Sister Alexandrine ; "we'll make conversation a little easier." She drew from her wide sleeve a card-board case, at the sight of which the poor invalid flushed with pleasure, like a child with a sweetmeat.

"My cigarettes! You have brought some more!" With a greedy movement which she could not control, she opened the case and lit one of the medicated cigarettes for relieving asthma. No doctor would have ordered such costly remedies to a patient in her circumstances, and she was almost ashamed to use them. She gazed with ardent gratitude through the acrid smoke which surrounded her grey face : "You spoil me !"

"That's all right, we must give away some little luxuries from time to time."

This was one of Sister Alexandrine's favourite sayings. Giving away from time to time "a few little luxuries," adding to the dry bread of charity the little extra of kindness. However hurried she was, she followed the same plan in the mental order with the poor recluse. She let her express her own ignorant, simple, suffering thoughts, touched as they were with idealism. This instinct, her only strength, was what Sister Alexandrine felt must be encouraged, and now the nun herself took up the conversation. Without leaving the humble details of such an existence, she opened up glimpses of the Infinite; she reasoned; she philosophised; she strove to rouse the miserable woman from the monotonous contemplation of her own hopeless lot; she lessened and hid it from her by the two absorbing visions—the eternal spectacle of human misery, and the world beyond.

"Oh, yes, there are many to be pitied more than me," said Madame Henry, as the Sister rose. "To go no farther, there's that little Régine who is learning suffering so young . . . and then I think there's something wrong with the new lodgers, the people opposite."

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Madame Henry, in her garrulous good-nature, paid no attention to her old mother, who was making cross faces at the thought of other people being pitied ; she continued :

“ Oh, something's wrong, I'm sure. The lady never goes out, and no one has called since they settled in a week ago. No one looks after her . . . not even her husband, I believe . . . and yet she ought to be seen to ; she's just going to be confined. It's a shame for her to be left as she is. Don't you call, Sister ? ”

“ Did she ask for me ? ”

“ Oh, she's not one to ask. She mustn't know that any one asked. She seems quite dazed. One day she asked Mother if she could get her work, embroidery or painting. All these ladies fancy that you can make money at that kind of thing. And then, of course, they don't know how to do anything else. Their name is Quantin, at least that is what they wished to be called.”

These remarks, and the calling Madame Quantin a “ lady,” showed Sister Alexandrine (who was an expert in these matters) the state of the case. They were hiding their poverty. For forty years Sister Alexandrine's days had been made up of

surprises, and little could now astonish her. Yet even she could not help starting a little as she entered, after a frightened murmur from within greeted her announcement.

"It is I, Sister Alexandrine."

The lodgings were the same as the Bréchets' and the Henrys', a room with two windows and a dressing-closet opening out of it; but if on the lower floor one could fancy one's self in a gipsy van, and if across the landing the emptiness and dulness of decent poverty struck the eye, the impression at the Quantins' was quite unexpected. The ordinary workman's room looked as if its contents had been rescued from a wreck at sea. The large plush-framed mirror, too high to hang up, leant against one wall which it covered entirely. Kitchen chairs were reflected in it, to their own astonishment. An embroidered satin coverlet was thrown over an old iron bedstead. Books, music, remnants of a library, were piled upon a deal table. On the wall pictures robbed of their frames, but in no way resembling Madame Henry's "dear departed," looked around them with consternation, and the same consternation was painted on the face which turned to Sister

Alexandrine. It was young and gentle, the face of a blue-eyed brunette, with an indefinable charm that neither mental nor physical suffering had been able to destroy. A pale blue muslin dressing-gown, plentifully trimmed with lace (another relic), concealed the young woman's figure. She could hardly walk, and seemed too weak to question the new-comer, of whom she was evidently frightened.

"My dear Madame," said Sister Alexandrine, "I must really apologise for intruding." Her manner had completely changed. It had no longer the gentle authority she used at the Bréchets', nor the encouraging familiarity she showed with the Henrys. The helpful, workaday Sister became a more refined woman, and the "young lady" pricked up her ears as if at a familiar sound.

"Please sit down, Sister," she murmured in her low exhausted voice.

"I should be still more indiscreet," went on the Sister, with her perpetual and always suitable smile, "if I did not immediately explain what brings me here. We have a small embroidery order just at present, and I thought perhaps you could help us."

A flash of child-like pleasure illumined Madame Quantin's big blue eyes, and as quickly disappeared.

"I should ask nothing better, Sister ; but I'm afraid that in my present state of health I couldn't work as well or as quickly as usual."

She broached the subject herself ; the wedding ring, her only ornament, was a conspicuous object, glittering on her thin finger.

"It is an anxious time for you," said Sister Alexandrine, "and I daresay you are quite inexperienced."

"Quite, Sister."

"Do you dread what's coming?"

"I admit I do. I feel very ill, and that frightens me."

"All young women in your situation feel like that. . . ."

"Oh, I'm not frightened for myself ; I don't care whether I recover. . . ."

It was getting dark. The next house threw its shadow across the court over the narrow windows. In the half light the Sister's face became a vague outline. The white head-dress and the grey habit were all that could be seen distinctly. Her indi-

viduality was lost ; she was less Sister Alexandrine than a "Sister," a type, the representative of a category, or rather of a chosen few. A "Sister," the incarnation of all that is superhuman in humanity, self-abnegation, abandonment of the soul to God, and of one life to others. The "Sister" is the depository of hope and charity, as the priest is the depository of faith. Madame Quantin saw nothing but a "Sister." She had loved and respected nuns since her childhood. She remembered them when all else had failed her. Her youth, her misery, her suffering overpowered her, and, sinking down beside her visitor on one of the wretched rush-bottomed chairs, she admitted her miserable secret, perhaps her one thought ever since her coming maternity had been made known to her.

"I wish I could die," she burst out, "but I can't face the idea of leaving the poor baby to its father !"

They were no longer strangers—sorrow and compassion had met. As Sister Alexandrine had pressed little Bréchet's feverish hands, and Madame Henry's skeleton ones, so she took these little useless, white hands in hers—hands that long ago would have



"They were no longer strangers—sorrow and compassion had met."

To face page.

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been just enough to betray the aristocrat to the guillotine.

"Your mother is dead, I suppose? Well, you must let me talk to you just as she would have done. You mustn't look too much on the black side. Of course, in marriage, little causes bring great suffering, but then, again, a very little will bring back peace and even happiness. You haven't been married very long, and even if you had, perhaps you wouldn't quite understand your husband. You are expecting your first child. Well, you don't know how a man may change when he is a father."

"He won't change, Sister, nor our position either," said Madame Quantin, in a dogged, hopeless voice.

"Your position," cried Sister Alexandrine, in the fresh vigorous tones which electrified drooping souls; "position isn't everything in this world! Lots of people have lived down their misfortunes, and have got on their feet again with the help of Providence. Be quite sure that Providence never forsakes those who have faith and energy."

"He has neither."

"But you?"

"He has taken all mine away."

"Your baby will restore it all."

The young woman was silent. Her confidences seemed abruptly checked, after too violent a relief. Sister Alexandrine was accustomed to this phase, and merely returned to the subject of the work which she offered to bring next day. When she rose, Madame Quantin did not detain her, but showed her out in silence. Suddenly she stopped with her hand on the door.

"Sister!" Her voice was choked. The silence had only been the preliminary to the violent effort the young woman was trying to make. "You are going to help me to-morrow? Help me to-day—I had no bread to eat this morning, and I shall have none to-night."

CHAPTER II

BIRDS OF THE AIR

THOSE establishments, which are all called "La Providence," are analogous (whoever may rule them separately); or rather all the religious Orders in charge of these houses grow alike, inasmuch as they are moulded to meet the same demands from the poor, and to fulfil the same obligation of charity.

The philanthropy of this parish was concentrated as usual in the district "Providence." The old house, of no particular style, was composed of several wings or buildings, joined to each other as they were severally required; it was humble enough not to frighten poor applicants away, and large enough to shelter them. The *crèche*, the school, and the dispensary had their place. The Sisters also took what they called "boarders"—about twenty old women, more or less infirm, of whom perhaps two were able to pay the important sum of twelve

pounds a year. Four or five other old crones, past any work elsewhere, were employed in sweeping, washing, and scrubbing.

One of them was the portress ; she opened the door in turn to every kind of visitor, from beggars in rags to ladies and gentlemen getting out of emblazoned carriages. Passing before the house with the mysterious name of " Providence," dark souls would feel a last gleam of hope ; remorse would visit troubled ones ; and while some would stop at the ever-open door to beg the help which here alone was theirs by right, so some would come to pay the debt which here alone seemed due, the tithe of their luxury—their overdue alms. Many secrets had passed under the low archway and through the narrow alley, bordered on one side by the kitchen and offices, on the other by the waiting-room windows. Modest, poor, and laborious life was here to be seen in all its simplicity. The " Providence " was, and always had been, poor ; the distress all round constantly and completely absorbed its resources : its own grant, fêtes in aid of the work, private gifts, and all contingent help. The little population under its shelter lived from hand to mouth, but in peace and even

happiness. From early morning a busy hum filled the old building; the murmur of the babies in the *crèche*, the voice of the teaching Sisters and the children repeating their lessons, the old people's chat, and the coming and going of visitors. At some times and on certain days the hum was louder. Cries of joy floated up from the recreation ground, and on Sundays the air was full of song and laughter, and all the gaiety of school feasts. But nightfall always brought calm; and the hour of rest was not without its charm. The infirmary, school, and dispensary Sisters had ended their daily task. The visiting Sisters returned, and, after waiting on the old boarders, always the first to be served, the nuns assembled in the refectory.

The last to come home on this, as on every other evening, were Sister Alexandrine and Sister Lawrence, her colleague. They were not reprimanded, as, although order was strictly kept indoors, it was impossible for them to observe the rigid punctuality of cloistered nuns.

Grace said, they sat down cheerfully to clumsy earthenware plates and tin covers, smiling at one another with the usual regret that the Rule prescribed silence during meals.

Convents have a double peculiarity. In spite of age, the nuns remain young. Amongst these twenty-three Sisters, some had quite child-like faces, like little Sister Cécile, the Benjamin of the Convent; none looked quite old, not even the eldest, the Superior, Sister Stéphanie, whose octogenarian wrinkles were illumined by her clear eyes, and who laughed like a novice.

From her place, she looked round maternally at her daughters, always anxious lest their zeal should outstrip their strength. This anxiety was all she was able to give her dear community now; she, who used to be so active and had worn herself out climbing attic stairs, was now almost entirely deprived of the use of her legs. The general entreaty had been that she would keep her post as Superior, and she still dragged herself all over the house on her crutches, adored by the babies in the *crèche*, rather feared in the girls' classes for her quick manner and infallible memory, and keeping a firm hand over the fast-growing boys in the charity school. However, the outside poor, whom she had visited so long, were still her greatest pre-occupation. She longed for news of them, and, as soon as the meal was over, she hurried

into the scantily furnished community room ; it contained a few seats and a round table, and its only ornaments were a chromolithograph of the Pope and a plaster statue of Our Lady, standing on a black marble clock which had stopped.

As soon as Sister Stéphanie was seated, every one began to talk at once. The Rule allowed half-an-hour's recreation before prayers and bed, and was fully taken advantage of. Friends paired together. Sister Cécile joined Sister Alexandrine to tell her the events of the day—the adventures, the rudeness or funny mistakes of the infants' class, and Sister Alexandrine took an interest in it all. She had also begun with the tiniest girls, and Sister Cécile's grave simplicity recalled her own youth. She was very fond of the little nun, who was only a girl of the lower classes, twenty years old, slender of body and of a retiring disposition. Such as she are wild flowers in the Garden of Souls.

But Sister Cécile had been always protected from coarse surroundings, for she left her native village in childhood. When her father, a heavy Norman peasant, became a widower, he placed her in the Convent, and

left her there when he married again. Ill-treated by her stepmother on her return home, and shocked by all her surroundings, she quickly went back to the "Sisters," but not, however, to those who had brought her up. Her virgin heart was full of love for the unhappy. Forsaken by her own belongings, she yearned to become the mother of other forlorn children, and as no one opposed her, she entered at seventeen the Convent of the Sisters of Providence of Bernay, as they more nearly realised her ideal than any others. Since then she had followed her vocation without an instant's regret, without even remembering that there existed any other sort of happiness in the world. She was a gentle, pretty, happy creature, with a rosy face and a slender figure, despite the heavy folds of her frieze habit. Her radiant youth cheered the lives of the nuns, and brightened the lot of the children she had adopted as her own.

She had particularly attached herself to Sister Alexandrine. The Superior, though indulgent and protecting, was taken a little out of community life by her infirmities, and seemed more like a very old grandmother. Sister Alexandrine could take the place of

Mother with the experience of her age, and her natural warmth of heart. She it was who first had tamed the shy and homesick little nun when she arrived from her native Normandy. She had the gift of attracting youth, and winning the confidence of the poor, who even preferred her to Sister Lawrence—a saint, if ever there was one.

This evening, after talking to Sister Lawrence, the Superior made haste to call up Sister Alexandrine.

“Now, Sister Alexandrine, tell me about your little birds.”

The little birds were those discovered every day—poor human birds fed by charity, trembling and wounded birds which she sheltered, picking them up as they were thrown from the nest with half their feathers gone, and the baby name sounded true as well as poetical on the lips of the gentle octogenarian. She thought of them as perhaps one ought to, tenderly and purely—poor creatures, whose human weaknesses are already atoned for by suffering. She loved them, and tried from a distance to interest herself as much as possible in their lives. She listened attentively to the murmured description, a sigh or a smile passing

in turn over her wrinkles, as Sister Alexandrine spoke of poverty discovered or help supplied. When it was over she made a troubled gesture with her old hands.

"Have we enough for these poor people?" Her forehead was puckered as she calculated. "Remedies, food, rent. . . . And poor Madame Quantin ought to have a good deal, I suppose. Those who ask nothing always need much. Our list is so long already and in this dead season! Our dead season as well! Well, God will provide."

The venerable face grew calm. Her hands were joined, this time in prayer; the bell rang, and the old Superior went towards the chapel on her crutches. The bell hushed all temporal pre-occupations in those obedient hearts. Voices were no longer heard save in prayer. All thoughts rose to God till it was time to rest. The last hour of the day was consecrated to Him, as would be the first of the morrow. Charity was feeding at the fountain head, so as to pour out fresh, abundant, and inexhaustible waters over ever thirsting human misery.

CHAPTER III

BENEFACTORS

EARLY rising pedestrians were hurrying along under a lowering sky and heavy rain. It was the first grey hour of daylight, when none but quiet, humble people were about. The shops were all shut; only bakers, dairies, and general dealers began to take down their shutters, and barrows of moist fruit and battered vegetables began to ply.

Sister Alexandrine and Sister Lawrence left the Convent, opening their cotton umbrellas. It was their hour too, the hour when want wakes up and cries for help, when invalids need refreshing after their long tedious night, when children must be washed and sent to school, and got out of the way of the workers about to start on their daily task. The two nuns walked a few steps together, then at a turning they separated, each in haste to be about her business.

Before eight o'clock Sister Alexandrine had tidied up the room of a poor woman in

her confinement in one street ; helped a poor infirm neighbour, and swept down a staircase in another house. Then, as she had a little spare time, she remembered an invalid in the Rue de la Seine, a consumptive in the last stage, to whom she was going to take some little dainty. She stopped by a barrow, bought some fine cherries, which the man let her have cheap, and bargained for a bunch of roses which he offered her for nothing.

"It'll bring me luck if you're my first customer," he said, with that naïve faith which had survived street scepticism.

She walked on under the rain quite happy. Such tokens of popular sympathy always touched her, though she had no illusions as to their depth.

"Almost everywhere we are liked, or at any rate respected, but still that won't prevent these good souls from voting with the members of parliament who are trying to get rid of us. Well! so much for human inconsistency. It's no use fretting over it."

She visited the consumptive girl and stayed some time. When she came out, the streets looked as usual, and the daily routine had begun. She pondered.

"It's too early for where I'm going, but

who knows how many places I may have to go to after, and the morning is the only time to catch people."

Leaving her usual localities she went to the Boulevard St. Germain, and started for the aristocratic quarters in which she was wont to fulfil not the least painful part of her vocation. When there was no money left to give away, and then only, with the vision of unpaid rents coming, as now, Sister Alexandrine braced herself to visit the rich, a harder task than visiting the poor. She scanned with an anxious eye the windows on each floor of the great houses: they were mostly closed.

"If only they hadn't all gone into the country."

Sister Alexandrine was right to be prepared for disappointment. At a house in the Rue de Grenelle, where she knocked with some amount of confidence, the answer was that every one had left the day before. "But if Sister would like the address of Madame la Marquise at the Château?" . . .

The nun shook her head. It was hard enough to get anything if she described the case of want close by—a letter would have no chance. Madame la Marquise had poor

people in the country, for whom the poor near her town house must give way.

A great helper of the Convent, Monsieur Duché, was also absent, visiting his daughter and first grandchild. The baptismal festivities must not be disturbed. The two best arrows in Sister's quiver were broken. But, luckily, she had others.

There was Madame de Clamereux close by. This was a very kind woman: childless, old, and delicate, she never left her handsome flat on the first floor of a fine old-fashioned building standing in its own garden. She was at home, but unable to see any one; she was ill and had been in bed for several days. However, perhaps she would make an exception. . . . After some talk the nun was admitted.

"Ah, dear Sister, you can count me as one of your sick people," exclaimed Madame de Clamereux, her weak, complaining voice coming from the depths of her great mahogany and brass bed, with its green silk canopy. She described her malady at length, calling her maid to testify to her sufferings, and the warnings of her doctors. She had called in several, and that evening there was to be a consultation. But she felt

very bad, some symptoms alarmed her, and one can't be too careful. . . . She was so absorbed in care for her health, and so delighted to talk of it to a person who was experienced in illness, that it was difficult to draw her attention to another subject. It seemed almost unkind to try ; but as she was kind hearted she did not take offence, and at last was quite grieved over Madame Henry's asthma.

"There is nothing so dreadful as that feeling of suffocation. I have it myself a little. I forgot to tell the Doctor so this morning ; I must tell him to-night. Perhaps it's the weather. In spite of my having ventilators fixed so that fresh air can always get in, it's breathless here to-day—don't you feel it so?"

"No, not here."

Sister Alexandrine, accustomed to the atmosphere of garrets, smiled a little as her eyes wandered over the vast Empire room, with its lofty window framing the fresh verdure of the garden.

"I was wrong," concluded Madame de Clamereux in a burst of regret ; "I ought to have pulled myself together and gone to Evian directly the hot weather set in—

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I must go as soon as I can get up. I shall rent a house and take the servants, as I am not strong enough for hôtel life. It is no good thinking of economy when one is ill. Doctors are ruinous! I am not very rich to-day, as you may imagine, Sister, still I want to do something for your poor asthmatic woman." Madame de Clamereux looked towards her writing-table and hesitated. . . . "I can't get up. Well, Sister, you'd better take what you find in my purse."

Sister Alexandrine found two sovereigns and some silver. Then, at the sound of a bell, which she knew was the Doctor's, Madame de Clamereux completely withdrew her attention and forgot all that had passed, or that there was such a thing as a single poor person on earth. She herself alone existed now. When she was well she would be charitable again.

"Where am I to go next?" Sister Alexandrine asked herself, as she went down the ancient stucco staircase, with its magnificent wrought-iron, Louis XIV. balustrade. She thought of a name with sudden hope—"Madame Doynel!" and with no further hesitation she jumped into a passing tram-

car. Madame Doynel had left the Faubourg St. Germain, but while she looked after the poor of her new parish, she did not forget those she had left.

She was the daughter of a very rich manufacturer in the North, and, having married a stockbroker, she possessed one of the largest fortunes in Paris. They had led a quiet life at first, but were now beginning to launch out a little. The Doynels had built a house in the Avenue d'Iéna, and were now living in great style.

Sister Alexandrine's grey frieze dress brushed past the blue and silver livery of a relay of footmen as she went through the sumptuous anterooms leading to the boudoir, where she sat down on an arm-chair covered in Pompadour silk. This Louis XVI. boudoir was Madame Doynel's greatest achievement. All the furniture and ornaments were authentic, verified by every expert in Paris, and had cost a small fortune; Rothschild had bid £680 for the fire-dogs, and had been outbid at £720. Madame Doynel could never refrain from telling this to other collectors, but she was not tempted to tell Sister Alexandrine.

After keeping her rather a long time, she

appeared gracious and kind as usual, but in a great state of commotion and bustle.

"I'm delighted to see you, dear Sister! What a pity I haven't more time for a chat with you, but we've got people coming for lunch. . . . No, don't get up yet. They won't be here for ten minutes, but that's the limit. We are expecting some diplomats. My husband has invited an entire Legation."

Monsieur Doynel had thought the best means of getting known was to belong to the "Aéro Club," and through this he had made these swell exotic acquaintances, whom Madame Doynel could not refrain from boasting about, with real bourgeois satisfaction and Parisian snobbishness. Sister Alexandrine grasped the situation. She was as little out of place in all this luxury as among her poor people; she seemed the link between the two classes which are less divided in many cases than one would think.

Suddenly Madame Doynel's smiling face called up some resemblance in the nun's mind. Tall, elegant, her small head crowned with masses of hair, her blue eyes fringed with long dark lashes — did not the rich Madame Doynel in her blue dress, covered

with white lace, recall somewhat poor Madame Quantin? Both dressed their hair alike, both wore their clothes with the same natural ease of women accustomed to fragile and costly materials. They must belong to the same class, perhaps they have even met. This woman would surely help the other.

"You guess what brings me," began Sister Alexandrine.

"Yes, and you were quite right to come. Let me just go and get some money from my husband."

"But don't you want to know whom you are helping?"

"Why? all is safe in your hands."

But Sister Alexandrine wanted to tell her tale. She thought, perhaps, that it would produce more than a trifling alms.

"A young woman about to be confined. . . . I'll send you some baby clothes. . . . I'm just making some now; it amuses me and I believe it brings luck. I fancy that by making them for others, I shall obtain from God the favour of needing them myself. It's so sad to have no children." A shadow crossed her face and passed away. Wheels were heard in the courtyard. "Here are my guests . . . I must catch my hus-

band," and she ran off. She returned the next moment agitated and confused. "Jacques had only this in his pocket, but I'll send you . . . you can come back . . . Oh, goodness, they're coming in."

She rushed into the next room to receive her visitors, while Sister Alexandrine discreetly slipped off into a passage. She sighed as she put the millionaire's gift into her large purse. It was a fifty franc note (£2, 5s. od.), which was sure later to be supplemented by more, but the extra money would come goodness knew when. Perhaps some day, when the Doynels would find something rarer than money, *i.e.* the time to interest themselves personally in the poor.

"After all, how are people, who are drawn into a wealthy life, to escape being absorbed by their surroundings! Is it to be expected that they can constantly remember distress, which perhaps they have never seen with their own eyes?" Thus the indulgent Sister Alexandrine reflected to herself, as the tramway took her back to the Convent in the pouring rain.

Despite her extravagance of threepence, she was late again. Every one was already in the refectory. In a hurry to go in, she

was rubbing her heavy shoes on the mat, when the portress called her.

"Sister, Sister, you're wanted."

Behind her was a young man with a fair beard. He came forward with the air of a gentleman, hat in hand; he was well dressed, and had evidently come through the rain in a private carriage, which was now standing at the door. Sister Alexandrine had a happy presentiment.

"Come in, Monsieur."

"I've come at an inconvenient time. . . . I don't like to disturb you, Sister, but I'm afraid I could not come back."

"Don't apologise. Come this way, please."

They looked at one another for a moment in the severe little sitting-room, feeling vaguely the strangeness of their meeting. He felt obliged to introduce himself.

"I ventured to come and see you, Sister, because I remember my mother used to speak of you. You haven't forgotten her—Madame du Plessis?"

"Poor Madame du Plessis, I should think I do remember her; no one who knew her could ever forget her."

Among recent deaths, Sister Alexandrine recalled that of Madame du Plessis. She

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remembered the poor, crape-clad woman, wounded on all sides, an unhappy wife and then an inconsolable widow, grieving after the children who had resembled herself, and unable to find comfort in the surviving one who was like the father. This, then, was the "little Robert," so often recommended to Sister Alexandrine's prayers by Madame du Plessis when they were together.

"Then you can feel for my loss," he continued. He looked away, his mouth trembled, and tears nearly came.

Sister Alexandrine took heart; her prayers had not been in vain; a man who can grieve for his mother has much good left in him.

"Your mother often spoke of you," she answered gently; "she loved you so."

"Perhaps too much; more than I deserved." Robert du Plessis spoke as if with some secret remorse, and then quickly caught himself up. "I must not keep you, Sister; I have a train to catch; I am just off to Deauville, and before leaving I wanted to come here. It's very simple; my mother loved the poor, and they must not be neglected now." The nun's maternal face seemed to fascinate the orphaned son. His confidences came against his will. "This is

my mother's birthday — I used always to give her a present, and I want to spend the money on what would have pleased her. So, as I don't know any poor people, and you do." . . . He laid a thousand franc (£40) note on the table.

"Oh, Monsieur! You are your mother's own son, and she must certainly rejoice to see this day!"

"If I could only give her back all the happiness of which she was robbed!"

With the same air of keeping back tears, Robert du Plessis went to the door followed by Sister Alexandrine. The old nun grieved to see him go, so little more than a boy, to meet all the temptations which must be lying in wait for him. Dear Lord! if she could only protect him! She tried to detain him under the archway.

"I should like to show you the good this will do," she said, with the note between her fingers; "the sick will have remedies, the poor will not be turned out of their lodgings. . . . If you could see yourself what distress there is! And it is so dreadful for the poor of a better class. Thanks to you, I can help a young couple who are really gentlepeople. The husband, I fancy, spent their money,

and there they are with nothing, absolutely nothing, forsaken by every one! . . . Yesterday they had no food."

"Spend it as you like, Sister, I would rather not know where it goes," and with frightened eagerness Robert du Plessis jumped into his *coupé*. He did not care to be reminded that a spendthrift can easily get through his fortune, and that if a scruple had made him keep back from Mademoiselle Huguette of the Varietés, who was accompanying him to Deauville, this money for his mother's present to the poor, perhaps he might not have enough strength of mind to keep the remnants of his already much diminished patrimony from Mademoiselle Huguette and her sisterhood. Would to God that he only had those youthful peccadilloes on his conscience which pass without leaving ineffaceable traces behind them! But he could never rouse himself from his cowardly, inexcusable state. His mother used to reproach him, and now she was gone; he reproached himself doubly, and was powerless to change!

Sister Alexandrine knew nothing of all this; still she felt vaguely sad as she came back with the gift, thinking that perhaps the

giver had departed for ever. She reflected on all the accumulated experience of her morning's work—

“What would become of the poor and unhappy if there were only ordinary people to help them? People with families, interests, ambitions, passions, something always to absorb them more than charity! On the one hand absolute self-sacrifice is needed, and on the other it cannot be given! Who would solve the problem if we were not here?”

CHAPTER IV

THE REWARD

RÉGINE BRÉCHET was pre-occupied. She was not fretting about the rent, because the money was there, hidden where father would never look for it, under little Madeleine's mattress. It was something new and strange which had set her thinking, a process to which she was little addicted. Suddenly the girl made up her mind to consult Sister Alexandrine.

"Is what they say true, Sister? Have you got to turn out like the rest?"

Sister Alexandrine winced. "The law is specially directed against teaching nuns. They intend to close all our schools, but I think that is all they can do."

"Explain to me once for all about the law, so that I can understand."

"Well, my poor Régine, I don't quite understand it myself."

"Really?" said Régine, incredulously.

"All the Congregations have to be autho-

rised," continued Sister Alexandrine, "and then they refuse the authorisation to those who ask for it, and take away the authorisation from those who have it already. Even when the Congregations are known to be authorised, it is assumed that some of their houses are not, and they are closed."

"That's a nice muddle!" Régine pondered, and then blundered on to a practical conclusion. "They are trying to pick a quarrel with you, and nothing can be done because Government is so powerful. One lot won't have any better luck than another. But Madame Cottard read in the papers that they won't suppress all the Orders at a time. That would make too much fuss, and then they'd want some one instead. They only send the Sisters away when they can be replaced."

"At that rate we could be sure of never being sent away?"

"Why?"

"Because it is rather difficult to replace us. One way or another," she continued, "they can replace teaching nuns by teachers, and nursing sisters by nurses. People will do the work after a fashion for payment. But who would take up our task? Who

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will go after the poor into their own homes ; who will care enough for them to nurse them like a relation, to share all their troubles, to comfort them, even to beg for them? Who would do that? Who would know how to? And who would do it for nothing? Those who turn the Sisters out, or who approve of their being turned out?"

"Well, Madame Cottard certainly wouldn't," growled Régine. She felt a sudden, coarse rage against Madame Cottard. She had always felt herself the inferior, because Madame Cottard was richer and cleverer than her lodgers, and very hard on them. Régine had been forced to fear and almost to respect her, but now that she had the rent-money ready, her courage returned. "I'll tell her what's what, the old good-for-nothing!" she cried. "She'd turn everyone out, and us first. She'd better look out for her money. Perhaps her day will come."

A word from Sister Alexandrine calmed Régine, but the nun carried away with her the vision of the great big girl, such a child at heart, who had looked for one instant like a *pétroleuse*. Sister Alexandrine could

remember the *pétroleuses*, and her heart felt sick with a new apprehension.

"Dear Lord," she said to herself, "if only the Government doesn't agitate the poor people till there arises one of those fits of revolutionary fury which it is powerless to control!"

But the nun seldom had much time to philosophise. The sound of a door quickly closing upstairs caught her attention. A man, a gentleman, hurried down from the fourth floor. He passed the Sister quickly, his hand raised to his hat, and his face hidden; he ran down the stairs without looking back, his head well down, and evidently not wishing to be seen. Sister Alexandrine knew who it was, though she had never seen him. Shabby smartness, dissipated face, doubtful air, all about him gave the impression of failure; he looked a ruined sporting man turned bookmaker; a battered rake, fast becoming an adventurer. The only striking characteristic in his very ordinary face was the protruding jaw, which gave him a look of cruelty. He was just what Sister Alexandrine pictured Madame Quantin's husband to be.

"Poor little woman!" She pitied her

more than ever, and a sudden anxiety overtook her. "I'm afraid he made a scene before going out. He looked nasty." Although she was getting old and beginning to feel the stairs, Sister Alexandrine went up to the fourth floor without stopping to rest. No one answered her ring at Madame Quantin's door. She turned the handle, as the door was not locked, and went in. The room was more lamentably untidy than when she had seen it first—chairs had been overturned, things thrown on the floor, furniture disturbed as if by an avalanche, and the deadly stillness of the room was like the silence after an explosion.

Yes, there had been a terrible scene. Sister Alexandrine saw that. Madame Quantin was lying stretched on the little iron bed. She had evidently felt faint and had lain down, then, after her husband had left, she had become unconscious. She lay there, her little hands tightly clasped and the great tears still standing on her closed eyelids. She looked so forlorn that, as Sister Alexandrine tried to raise her, she called up with indignation the image of the shabby dandy she had just seen.

"Fancy leaving a poor little wretch in

such a state! A woman in her condition! What a husband! What a father!" Madame Quantin opened her eyes and Sister Alexandrine quickly recovered her usual calm and smiling manner. "There, dear child, it's nothing—it's all over!"

Madame Quantin sat up, bewildered to find herself leaning against a friendly shoulder, a kind hand in hers. A stupefied expression crossed her face, and then a sudden peace. With the wild gesture of a drowning woman, she threw her arms round the nun's neck and began to sob.

"Oh, you don't know, Sister! He struck me, look!"

The nun shuddered. The young woman's thin cheek was marred with a red patch, the trace of the brute's hand who had committed the double sacrilege of striking the wife and expectant mother! The nun had seen such things before. In poor homes, amongst the wretched slaves of drink, almost bereft of reason, what unknown martyrs had she not had to cheer and encourage! But this poor little martyr felt more than the blow. There was the shame of a delicate, refined being, powerless to defend herself, or even to complain, and the bewilderment

of a young wife forsaken by all, fallen from decent society into such surroundings; abandoned defenceless to the worthless companion who was killing her. The case was so extreme that ordinary encouragement and consolation seemed useless. Still one could remove the gag of silence, and let the poor child sob out all her troubles; perhaps there might be some way of comforting her. Sister Alexandrine took the frail, heaving shoulders into a maternal embrace.

"Don't keep it in, my poor child, if it consoles you to speak. You needn't mind me. We're so accustomed to hear everything and repeat nothing. A nun doesn't count, you know!"

"Yes, I feel I must speak to some one, or I shall go mad, and I must keep sane. I don't want to have the thoughts I had last year. . . . Last year . . . you won't believe me . . . I was nearly ending it all."

Madame Quantin's beautiful, anguished eyes looked into the nun's peaceful face.

"No, no," she said smiling, "you wouldn't have done that."

"Oh, yes; I'm not exaggerating. He knows I'm mad; he says so—I think he's driven me mad, so that I'm helpless." The

flood-gates were open, the stream rushed out. "I'm only like other women ; I should have tried for a separation or a divorce. I'm shocking you, yes, I know, but I tell you I'm mad. You will say many women have bad husbands and are resigned to their fate. Then they don't suffer what I do. They are not like me—unhappy in every way, reduced to the lowest ebb, obliged to hide, and even to change their name. They are not ill-treated, as I have been to-day, by the fathers of their children!"

A spasm shook her. Sister Alexandrine could not contradict the dreadful evidence.

"Yes, my poor child, you are most bitterly afflicted! Your cross is hard to carry! Still there is a way of lightening it. If it isn't enough to remember that you are suffering for duty's sake, remember you must be strong and patient for the little angel who is coming, and it will console you when it comes."

"Do you know what my husband says? 'What are we to do with this fresh nuisance? Isn't it enough to have to drag a woman about with one?' A man with such ideas ought never to have married. But I oughtn't to complain—I'm as bad as he is.

It's all my fault. I knew I should never love him when I married him."

Madame Quantin was sitting on her bed, her eyes now dry and brilliant, trying to free her poor brain from all the wild ideas which oppressed it. She waited for the Sister's gentle question—

"My child, why did you marry your husband if you didn't love him?"

"Because I was in love with some one else, and he had treated me as badly!"

Sister Alexandrine noticed that this bad treatment did not make Madame Quantin shudder with disgust and rebellion, as when she spoke of her husband, and she seemed to find a sort of bitter joy in recalling her past.

"So I said to myself that my life was over, and nothing was left but to swallow my pride and marry—a girl's idea! I accepted the first comer, without even an inquiry, without even realising that I was ruining my life."

"But had you no parents?"

"Neither father nor mother. Only distant relations, longing to get rid of me. There was an aunt of mine whom I couldn't get at; she would never have let me make

such a marriage. I must explain . . . the other man, who was the cause of everything, was her son."

As Madame Quantin went on talking, she grew calmer. The mere fact of concentrating her thoughts and putting them into words, seemed to soothe her a little.

"You must know all, to understand. I couldn't tell these things to any one, but as you say, a nun doesn't count. I will tell you everything. If I grew fond of my cousin, it was because of his mother in the first instance. I spent a whole summer in the country with her, like her own daughter. Then when my cousin joined us, it seemed quite natural for him to like me. But soon his feelings grew stronger. He who had always been so eager to get back to Paris stayed on with us, and I could see it was because of me. At last he told me he loved me, and that we must spend our lives together. I understood that we were engaged, and so did my aunt. She gave her consent and we were happy. There was no one on my side to offer any opposition. Was it not natural to believe in my happiness?"

She stopped with the same questioning, tortured look, like a creature who can no

longer trust her own judgment, and needs the intervention of others.

"What happened?" asked the nun.

"Nothing! that was all!" said Madame Quantin with a short laugh ending in a sob. "I went back to my guardian to tell him of my engagement. It was a good match for me, and my relations were rather jealous. They were surprised at my cousin deciding so quickly, after the life he had led hitherto. I didn't doubt him in the least. His last words were that he would bring me my engagement-ring. I waited . . . and he never came back! I heard nothing more, and my guardian got no answer to his letter. He had let himself be drawn under other influence in Paris, and had forgotten his whim for domestic happiness. As he could think of no honourable pretext for forsaking me, he disappeared and kept silence. Perhaps he did not realise how badly he had behaved. He no longer loved me, and forgot that I still loved him. His mother tried every possible means, and, if she failed, certainly no one else could have succeeded. She died of grief, I think, a few months after, not having had the courage to explain things to me. Others did so, and did not

spare me. Ah, why do people tell girls just enough to make them think they can understand? Their own crude judgment maddens them. If I had been left in ignorance, I should have kept my illusions, and have waited instead of growing desperate. If I had had the experience I have now, I shouldn't have given up hope so quickly, and perhaps he would have come back to me."

"No, my child, don't think that. A disloyal man is not worth regret. He is even worse than a brutal one."

The young woman understood the allusion, as she answered with her air of pain—

"Don't you call my husband disloyal too?" Her anger overcame her again, and she went on with a violent emphasis on each word: "He has played a disgraceful farce with me, from beginning to end. I was loyal, perhaps too much so. I told him everything when we were married, and he didn't mind anything. He was only thinking of my money and his debts; he knew no other girl would have accepted him. He was a distant relation of my guardian, and he was also in his family's way. They thought us two wrecks that it was con-

venient to unite and launch again. Ah, it didn't take us long to sink! Our life was a hell after the first month. Unfaithfulness, villainy of all kinds, and the most degrading scenes of jealousy—in the midst of it all I hardly had time to notice his wild extravagance, and the amount of papers I was always signing for him. Then one day, writs began to shower on us—I understood nothing of business. It was all over in six months; man in possession, furniture seized, land sold, everything gone! That was last year. Then my husband declared he could get work in Paris and we came here. I don't know what he does, but he is madder, more wicked, and more despicable every day. It only took us a year to come to this, and what further will become of us I don't know. Of course every one has turned their backs on us, and it is just as well. If people who used to know me could see me now! I spend the whole day in this room, too ill to do anything, and feeling my reason giving way. But I live in dread of the return of my husband or a bailiff. It seems our things are to be seized again, for wages we owed our butler—for we had a butler eighteen months ago. Then he

waited on me at table—now he is pursuing us as a creditor. If we are turned out of here, I don't know where we can go. Could I go into the hospital, so that at any rate the baby need not die of neglect?"

"You shall be well looked after, dear child; I will be with you. And you are not altogether forsaken; things aren't even quite so bad as you think."

"What hope is there?"

The Sister's quick brain had already hit upon an idea. "Everybody has some good quality; your husband can't be the one exception. Let us see—is he intelligent?"

"Too clever for the use he makes of his intellect."

"He might be induced to cultivate his mind. You said he was thinking of some work."

"But he didn't get it."

"It wouldn't be impossible to get him something else. We must look round; he has been through the regular course, I suppose. What is his speciality?"

"Figures."

"That's right—figures are the great thing nowadays. And work will not only help him materially; it will bring back peace into

your lives. A busy man is spared many temptations, not to speak of the mental relief which always follows an accomplished task. The only way to keep straight, or to raise oneself, is to stick to one's duty."

Madame Quantin hung her head. The words applied to her too.

"Well," pursued the sister quickly, "we can meet present difficulties till better days come. We can give the last creditor a payment on account. Then—excuse me, but you don't seem to know anything about housekeeping, and you are not in a state to do anything at present. I will send you a nice woman, who will come for very little. Don't fret, the dear Lord has given me enough to keep you going for a little."

Sister Alexandrine took out her big leather purse, which had already shrunk since the last providential gift had filled it. Madame Quantin blushed all over her pale face, till her bruise was hidden. One humiliation drove out another.

"You've helped me once already, Sister; I'm taking money that belongs to the poor. But am I not a beggar myself?" she cried with a gesture of misery. Her eyes swept the wretched room with their bewildered

air, till they met the nun's encouraging smile.

"I am the poorest of all," said Sister Alexandrine gaily, "and always must be, because of my vow. As for this money, you need have no scruple in accepting it. If it is a boon to those who receive it, those who give it sometimes reap quite as much good—or even more."

The young woman stopped the hand half way. "You must not think me an adventuress—you might if you were like other people. I have given you no guarantee for my story, not even my name. It isn't Quantin, at least that's only my husband's first name; he is the Baron Quantin de Virolles. That will not convey anything to you. . . . The family is only known in Provence, but perhaps you might have met some of my own relations in Paris. My aunt lived in your neighbourhood and was very charitable—Madame du Plessis."

"Madame du Plessis!" . . . Sister Alexandrine could not keep back a start of astonishment, which the young woman eagerly watched.

"Did you know her? Perhaps you know all about her better than I do."

"I only came across her in charitable work."

Madame Quantin's intense curiosity abated. Had she hoped to hear something of the man she could not forget? Sister Alexandrine was silent. But she also was thinking of the young man, with his quiet manners and rather weak face—Robert du Plessis! Was it "poor little Robert" who had brought about all this, who had done more harm than he could realise or ever repair? But perhaps one could undo a little of it, alas! so little. Still, that would take something off his conscience on the Last Day! The nun put what remained in her purse into a poor little empty one that lay, a useless object, on the mantelpiece, and hurried away, finger on lip, to escape thanks.

"Hush, let us forget that. Remember what I have said to you."

That evening, when Sister Alexandrine got back to the Convent, she was still thrilling with pity and helpful zeal.

"The dear Lord sent me just in time! The poor woman was at the last extremity. If she can just bear up till the child is born, and it is healthy, she will have an aim and a hope in life. There will be no chance then

of her reason going. The husband must get work—I shall go back to Monsieur Doynel. When people are so rich, a recommendation from them will do anything. Ah, poor Madame du Plessis! how she suffered on earth! She is praying for her son in heaven, and she sent me! What a lot of different troubles! If only one had the time and the power in one's whole life to help them all!"

The soft, warm, summer twilight was soothing to the tired workers after their daily task. Sister Alexandrine, before going in, glanced at the children playing in the quiet street and the shopkeepers at their doors taking a breath of the evening air; the nun gave herself the luxury of gazing at the trees hanging over a neighbouring wall, the broad red rays of the setting sun, and the towers of Saint Sulpice on the horizon. Then she entered the ever-open door of La Providence. The old portress let her pass in silence. No one was in the alley—not a face was at the windows. As she went in, little Sister Cécile, who had been watching for her, came to meet her: "Oh, come, Sister, we are all ——"

"What is the matter?"

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“A terrible misfortune!”

Nuns have no interests of their own in this world, and only one blow can strike them collectively. That blow had fallen! In the community-room sat old Sister Stéphanie amongst her dismayed daughters. She was weeping noiselessly; she who had never been seen to shed a tear. Great drops rolled over her wrinkled cheeks. She held a letter from the Mother-House in her hand—she held it out to Sister Alexandrine, who was too much taken aback to keep silent.

“Our teaching certificate not enough . . . the closing of all our houses . . . suppression of the Order!”

At this supreme moment, when her religious life was expiring, the past returned to Sister Alexandrine. The old, generous, vigorous nature, prompt to act on the moment, overpowered her calm, peaceful, monastic sweetness. At the thought of the octogenarian who had spent her whole life in the service of the poor, of the young nuns, who, like Sister Cécile, were cheerfully making a daily holocaust of their youth; and of all the brave comrades who were to be stripped of their rights, turned out of doors, and treated like outcasts, Sister

Alexandrine for one moment forgot resignation and remembered only justice. She recalled sacrifices made, help rendered, sorrow soothed, with eyes riveted to the paper which decided their fate.

"This!" she murmured, "this is our reward!"

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CHAPTER V

JUSTICE

THEY came in, and no one barred the way. Still they were recognised before the Government agent showed his sash—they were expected. The Convent doorway, through which pain, poverty, shame, and despair had so often passed, could easily admit persecution as well. Sister Alexandrine received them.

“What do you want, gentlemen?”

“We wish to see the Superior.”

“Our Mother cannot come down; she is eighty-five, and almost paralysed. But I will take you to her, if you will kindly follow me.”

They advanced silently, hat in hand—a sombre group between the white walls shining in the radiant August sunshine. There were six, all with the weak, common faces of officials drilled like tools to all emergencies, modern types whose torpid souls cannot infuse any character into their fea-

tures. Some differed from others. The chief officer was tall, with drooping moustache; he held himself well and affected the air of a society man; another, with a black beard and square face, wore a short jacket and no gloves; the oldest, probably a magistrate, was grey-headed. He wore a decoration, was quiet in manner, and looked pained, as if he was trespassing and knew it.

They followed Sister Alexandrine into the empty visitors' room. All was open to them. Instead of taking them through a passage and up the back stair, as they would have consented to go, they were conducted through the vast ground floor to the corner of the street, and back through the courtyard divided and assigned to all the different departments of the house; the Sisters' refectory, simply white-washed, with plain wooden chairs round the table, the kitchens, the charity school, the class-rooms, the dispensary—all looked in the accustomed order, though so soon to be disturbed. The proscribed nuns, with tranquil energy, were continuing their work till forcibly stopped. The cooking Sisters stood round the fire, where gigantic stock-pots contained

the soup which had been distributed to the poor every morning for forty years, and would be again to-day, if there were time ; the dispensing Sister was in front of her cupboard ; one of the nursing Sisters was dressing an incurable wound on the foot of a poor scrofulous child, another was rolling a bandage round the wrist of a tall, miserable, wan-faced boy. The Convent, raided by the police like a house of ill-fame, revealed its mysteries ; it laid bare its pure, benevolent, dazzling life of charity. There needed no explanation, no answer, no justification ; its persecutors were answered.

Then they went through the class-rooms. The teaching Sisters were in their places, facing their pupils ; not a child was missing. Books and copy-books were open on the desks, and, in the lowest class, baby voices were reading from the blackboard the fortuitous sentence, written in Sister Cécile's best hand, " We must pity the wicked, and pray for them." The magistrate hung his head. They passed through, sullen and ashamed, not knowing where to look ; abashed by the nuns' calm faces and the children's terrified eyes ; even the babies in the *crèche* schoolroom looked up startled.

Sister Alexandrine's quiet ease added to the men's embarrassment. She gently warned them.

"Take care, there is a step here." When they had gone up another staircase and through a passage, she remarked, "It is here."

They entered the infirmary, the largest and most comfortable room in the house. Several of the old boarders spent their whole time there. Three were bedridden; wrinkled heads were raised from their pillows; eyes, which had looked upon every sad sight in the world, were turned in alarm on the new comers—heralds of hitherto unknown crime or misfortune. There were about twenty other old women there, the most pitiable victims of the impending catastrophe—septuagenarians, octogenarians, quite helpless; they alone had no refuge outside, since even the sick would find a hospital bed to die in. They had not stopped lamenting since they had known of their fate, they gave themselves up to the childish despair and anger of old age; Sister Stéphanie had stayed with them to calm them. Perhaps she had some vague hope that when the men saw the action they were

about to commit, in all its enormity, they would have pity, perhaps accord a respite; they could never have the wicked folly to persist.

She rose, a tiny woman, facing the tall man with the drooping moustache and official sash, and waited for him to speak; her answer was ready. A group of men stood at one end of the room, two or three priests, a lawyer, and some of the friends and benefactors of the Convent. The official bowed.

"Madame, a painful duty awaits me." At the word duty, such an expression crossed his hearer's face, that he felt utterly ridiculous. He took refuge in brusqueness. "I am sorry to have to remind you of the answer given to your Mother-House when authorisation was applied for. Furthermore, I must ask you to leave this house at once, and to disperse your community. The legal limit expired at midnight yesterday."

"Sir, you have no right to tell me this."

"We are not here to discuss the matter, Madame," said the officer with an embarrassed smile, which was reflected on the faces of his men. The bearded man absolutely grinned. The Magistrate set his mouth and looked out of the window.

"Gentlemen," continued the old Superior, whose assumed courage was flagging, "I protest, and I intend to protest, if I can do nothing else. I bought this house and paid for it myself. My title deeds are in order—you can ask Monsieur for them," she added, pointing to the lawyer who bowed in approval. "No law can authorise you to seize my house, without running counter to all other laws for protecting property."

As he had announced, the officer refused to enter into any discussion; he confined himself to advice.

"Madame, what will you gain by resisting?"

"What shall I gain by submitting?"

He had no answer ready. The Superior made a last effort.

"You are not only robbing us, but the poor. You are not only attacking our liberty by stopping our work, you are mortally injuring the unfortunate creatures whom we assist. If you have the right to do that, then there is no such thing in the world as honour, justice, or even common humanity . . . we are worse off than amongst savages. I have been amongst them, sir, amongst pagans. They never forbade me to nurse

the sick or to feed the hungry. They left the outcasts to me—and you are going to take them from me!”

Her tears choked her.

“Let us be quick,” murmured the officer, taking advantage of even this interruption.

“One moment, sir ; there is one thing more to settle.” She signed to Sister Alexandrine, who began to speak in her energetic voice. The sobs of the old women stopped, and the officials felt that all was not yet settled, while a gleam of hope lit up the faces of the sick.

“You are taking all we possess, sir, and turning us out of doors. We are twenty-three nuns without home or means for the future. It is your good pleasure to persecute us ; we will let that pass. You drive the children from our schools, you send them to secular ones, where they will one day become anarchists and savages. That is your aim ; we will let that pass. But our old people? . . . Our sick? . . . What are you going to do with them? We have six people here over eighty years old, not to speak of Reverend Mother, and two paralytics. We have a poor woman with dropsy, whom you see before you. Who will look after these poor wretches? Who will feed

them to-night or to-morrow when you have turned them out?"

"You must have provided for that, Madame."

"Kindly tell me, sir, how we could possibly have done so? As long as we had food and a roof over our heads, we could share it with them. But you leave us nothing—you turn us literally into the street. We must turn our sick and dying into the street too."

"But that is abominable, Madame," cried the officer; "that is inhuman!"

"Do *you* talk to me of what is abominable and inhuman?" The nun's voice was so scornful that the officer was nettled at last. He lost his temper.

"The law must take its course. This must end."

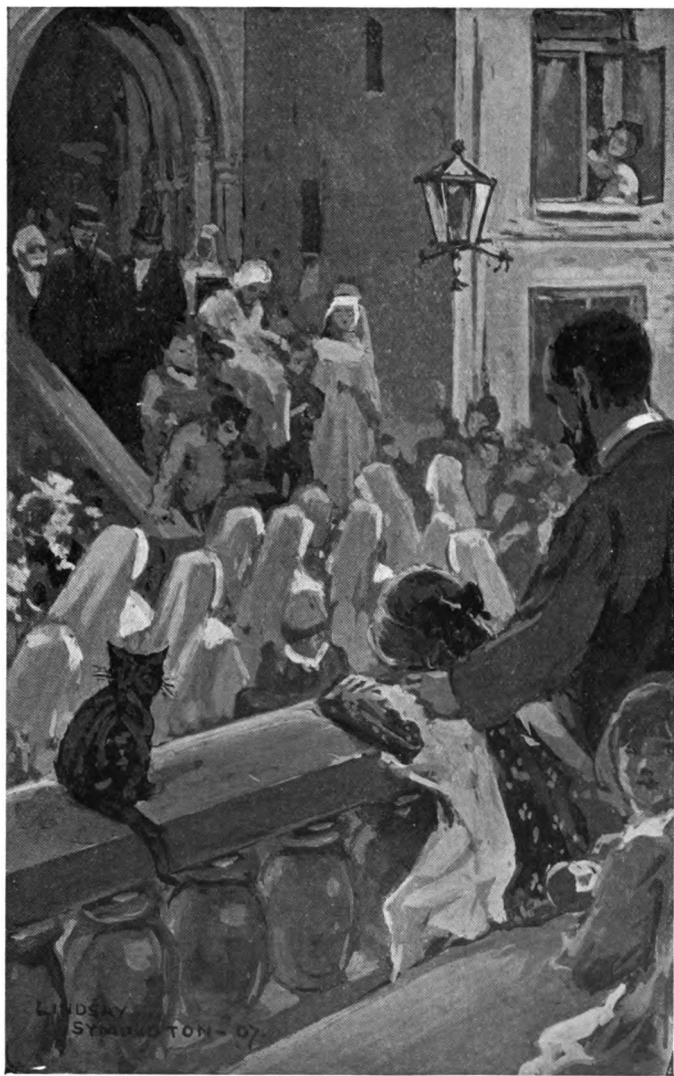
"Well, let it end! Here is Reverend Mother, here are our sick people. Put them out yourself, and shut the door in their faces. That is what you intend to happen; do it then with your own hands by broad daylight before us all; then, at any rate, you can no longer deceive any one by talking about liberty and love of the people. These are 'the people!' These women and ourselves—let us see how you will treat us!"

She moved sharply aside, and behind her stood the old Superior leaning against the paralytic woman's bed. The officer advanced and laid his hand on Sister Stéphanie's shoulder. An angry murmur went round the room, and above it could be heard the strident voice of one of the boarders—a tall, bent old woman in mourning—

“I come from Mulhouse. I've been driven out before, but at least that was by the Prussians.”

The officer turned his back on her. She repeated the sentence to a soldierly looking old man with a decoration, who began to swear like one possessed, as perhaps he had not sworn since Gravelotte. Then there was a sudden silence, and all fell back. Sister Stéphanie dragged herself from one bed to the other, kissing those who could not get up. Then she went out leaning on Sister Alexandrine and followed by her miserable crowd of old women.

The other nuns were waiting outside, and formed a procession. The white caps and grey dresses filed out between the white walls, and descended the narrow staircase for the last time. It was the retreat of brave troops, forsaken and betrayed when they



"The other Nuns were waiting outside, and formed a procession."

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could not defend themselves, and who were going to die elsewhere. The old officer twisted his moustache with fury. He had been at Metz, and remembered it. On the way out the Superior's strength gave way; she could no longer move even with help.

They placed her on a chair, which the men lifted. Thus she crossed the threshold of the house which for forty years she had shared with the poor!

The vast ground floor, lately so full, was already empty! Everything was just as it had been left, books open before the empty places, empty saucepans on the fire, all life suddenly arrested. But the courtyard, on the contrary, was full of animation. A partial removal of the contents of the house was taking place, to forestall the official affixing of seals. A few pieces of furniture had been hurriedly brought down. The mattresses from the cells and dormitories had been thrown out of window. The sisters now hurried to the kitchen to empty cupboards and remove utensils. Sister Lawrence had hit upon the idea of assembling all the poor patients of the dispensary and beggars to help raid "La Providence." They crowded

round her as she stood with a pale face and wild, black eyes.

“All we had was meant to be given away. Take what belongs to you, and what you want, and carry it home.”

She had taken the inspiration from the life of her Patron, Saint Lawrence, who gave away to the poor the threatened treasures of his church; and a real scene in the annals of persecution was enacted once again in spite of the mean surroundings and vulgar details; grinning ragamuffins standing by, grotesque and awkward people laden with miscellaneous objects, some making sly, greedy gestures. It was a scene from ancient Rome played by Parisian actors, but still retaining some of its primitive solemnity. One might smile at old Bréchet piling bedding on to a truck which he was too drunk to balance evenly; but tears would come at the thought of the wicked deed just perpetrated, and the wretchedness that must follow.

The nuns crossed the courtyard carrying their possessions—little parcels of linen and essentials. Sister Lawrence then abandoned her task and the division was left to chance. Discipline ruled once more; she followed

her Sisters, and they all went out together. They found themselves the centre of a crowd outside in the street; friends, protégés, neighbours—all attracted by the unusual commotion; passers-by stopping and shouldering curious and angry spectators. The crowd, mostly of the lower classes, was too big for the few police to control, and grew every moment. As the proscribed Sisters appeared, cries and protestations broke out—

“Long live the Sisters!”

They had brought flowers to offer, and even to throw underneath their feet. Sister Cécile, one of the favourites, was surrounded by groups of sobbing children. Parents, workmen employed in the Convent, all the small fry who were losing charity or their means of livelihood, swarmed about the nuns. Hands clutched their grey frieze dresses.

“Don’t go! What are we without you?”

The summer sun blazed hotter and hotter. Personal interest began to awake. A butcher, followed by his bare-armed assistants, forced his way through the crowd. He supplied the Convent, and his best customers were going! His angry voice swelled the chorus of lamentations.

"Liberty! Liberty!"

Régine Bréchet, her hair flying, her long arms violently waving in the air, was shouting, "Down with tyrants!"

It was the fatal signal which always heralds a riot amongst the people, when they are beside themselves, and have no one on whom to wreck vengeance. They denounce vague "tyrants," and pour out their accumulations of exasperated endurance. The revolutionary cry went down the street, echoing from the old walls which had seen carts pass, a hundred years ago, containing successive "tyrants," from Louis XVI. to Danton and Robespierre.

But help was coming. The police energetically "moved on" the crowd, and cleared the road for cabs to drive up. The Sisters got in two by two.

"Where do you wish to go?" Some people, principally of the upper classes, who had been present at the eviction, ladies of charity, managed to get to them.

"Come to us, come to us, for a time, even just for to-day!"

The impulse was sincere. All hearts swelled with pity for the oppressed. But the nuns declined all offers. Most of them had settled their destination beforehand.

Some gave the address of a relation, others of a railway station. Police in plain clothes amongst the crowd carefully took down the addresses. As each cab drove off, hats were raised and handkerchiefs waved. "*Au revoir*," cried the crowd, and the interrupted demonstration died off along the streets.

"Poor things, dear souls," murmured old Sister Stéphanie; half blind and almost unconscious in the cab where she had been lifted, her last impression was the memory of all she had been to the poor creatures, and that she could do no more for them.

Sister Alexandrine had got in with her, and Sister Cécile sat on the little front seat. The point of view varied in each case. The old Superior had survived all her relations. Sister Alexandrine never spoke of hers. . . . She had been "Sister Alexandrine" for so many years, that no one even inquired what her name had been in the world. As for little Sister Cécile, her father's door was the last she would think of knocking at. When their turn came to give their destination they looked at each other. A politely-spoken, little old woman who had stood

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back to let others pass, crept up to the cab door.

"Would the ladies honour me by sleeping at my house? It is plain but clean. . . . Sister Alexandrine knows it well. We can make up a bed, and there is another belonging to my daughter, who has not been able to lie down these fifteen years, as Sister Alexandrine knows."

She addressed Sister Alexandrine, who had charge of the infirm Superior, and the young nun. This poor but decent shelter would suit them better than any other place. She thanked Madame Henry's mother, and pressed her hand as she gave the order, "Rue de Buci."

Then, suddenly, as if the people had at last realised the catastrophe, a violent clamour arose. The scattered crowd re-assembled in larger numbers, and boldly pressed forward as the Government officials left the Convent after the Sisters. The comparative calm was over. The Commissary no longer gave himself society airs; he rushed on with furious gestures, ordering his men along. They fought their way with their fists through the crowd, shouldering, pushing, hitting haphazard, and only sparing

a few of their own way of thinking who shouted, "Down with cassocks!" "Long live Socialism!"

The Doynel's motor went from that scene up the Champs Elysées. The obscure tragedy which had just taken place in a poor neighbourhood seemed already a thousand miles away. Now nothing disturbed the current of fashionable life. All was cheerful animation, opulence, the peaceful and prosperous aspect of the prettiest city in the world; under the blue sky, surrounded by bright flowers, trees, and sparkling fountains, it was the easiest thing in the world to feel perfectly safe. Even those who pitied the fate of others did not dream for an instant of any personal danger.

"Poor nuns," said Madame Doynel with one last little sigh, as they passed the Rond Point, "what will become of them?" But the first heat of her indignation was already cooling. Conscience was appeased by the thought of duty fulfilled, the fatigue of having turned out and run some risk.

"They did not let themselves be taken quite unawares," said the excellent Monsieur Doynel; "the proof is that they refused some of the help offered."

When neither his feelings nor his purse suffered, he liked to think that others were above want. This argument from such a sensible man soothed his wife. She even began to laugh.

"It would have been too funny though, Jacques, if we had come home with about twenty nuns! I was quite ready to do it; it was they who refused."

"Luckily they are more sensible than you," said Monsieur Doynel, who, though he had been very chivalrous all the morning, and had loudly proclaimed his principles, was in no hurry to renew his exploits. He thought it no more than prudent to begin throwing cold water on his wife's generous enthusiasm.

"Would it have really been so silly?" thought Madame Doynel to herself. In her set people were always saying to her, "You are so 'out of it.' You swallow everything people tell you!" A young, pretty woman can't be expected to make herself ridiculous after all! She had really taken the whole thing for a tragedy just now, but she already began to forget it. The crowd had all scattered and dispersed itself through Paris; old Bréchet had finished the day in

a public-house. The boarders were seeking shelter, and the sick had been taken to the hospital. Not a living soul was left in the Convent. People did not even stop as they passed the gateway.

“Providence House” had been suppressed. It no longer existed; the only memento of the fatal day was the great blackboard which hung in the deserted class-room, still bearing the sweet, mysterious words, which summed up the tragedy and its moral: “We should pity the wicked, and pray for them.”

CHAPTER VI

IN STRANGE QUARTERS

THE men at the packers' left off nailing up their cases. The gas collector, who had been round testing meters, stopped in the courtyard. Régine Bréchet ran downstairs, dragging little Louis by one hand and carrying Madeleine on her other arm. Even Madame Legrand, who was generally so retiring, could not resist looking out of her window. Madame Cottard was "giving it" to Madame Henry's mother; the landlady was leaning against the front doorway, enjoying the air. She was holding out her newspaper with both arms, filling up the passage, and trying to read by the waning daylight, when her lodger came trotting in like a little mouse, wrapping her cape over a netful of provisions that she was trying to hide.

Instead of moving to make room, Madame Cottard stopped insolently where she was.

She looked curiously at the cape, and then became quarrelsome.

"What is all this about? A nice time to go marketing! Don't you know that in properly-kept houses, no 'parings' are allowed to be thrown out on the landings after mid-day?"

Madame Henry's mother tried to turn a deaf ear at first, an easy matter for her; then she turned spiteful, and excused herself on the plea that she did not know it was a properly kept house. Why, for instance, were dogs not prevented from dragging bones all over the place, and why was one lodger allowed to lie dead-drunk all night on the landing?

"You needn't talk of other people," shouted Madame Cottard, brandishing her newspaper; "no one else would have dared to do what you have."

"And what is that, pray?"

"You have brought people into my house who have no business here!"

"Your house! I thought that when one paid rent one was at home, and could invite one's friends!" Madame Henry's mother was getting angry, her face was quite red under her black cap.

"Not at all; I let the lodgings to you and not to these women. The idea of five people in two rooms!"

"Downstairs there are eight, and they make more disturbance than we should, if there were twenty of us!"

"As to disturbances, perhaps you will have more yet."

Madame Henry's mother became deaf again. She went on talking, proud of the admiration of the bystanders; even peevish Madame Legrand was looking on from an upper window.

"No one has interfered with you, Madame Cottard, and you've no right to interfere with other people."

"You needn't be so set up. You may have the police after you yet!" Shouting these words at the top of her voice, to make sure of their reaching her deaf lodger's ears, Madame Cottard went indoors.

The old woman's flushed face turned pale; she hung her head, and hurried up the four flights of stairs without waiting to talk to her audience. She was still agitated when she reached the room that held the last remnants of the Sisters of the Providence. It was a strange home for them, and recalled the

romantic beginnings of the foundresses of the Order.

In just such a humble room had Ste Chantal, Madame Legras, and Jeanne Jugaud gathered their first associates together and the first poor that they had sheltered. Still there was one difference—then it meant infancy, now alas! decay. This great, bare, empty room was not the humble cradle of a community, but its last refuge. The Mother-House and the provincial Convents had already been closed for a month. The Order, an exclusively French one, had no houses abroad, and only the Mother-General and a few privileged subjects had been accepted for foreign mission work. Even that was only temporary tolerance. There was no room for the rest in distant countries, not even in that part of the Desert where the French Flag was planted. They were dispersed and separated without the slightest hope of resuming community life.

"We are among the lucky ones," said brave Sister Alexandrine, as she arrived at Madame Henry's lodgings with her two companions.

Sister Stéphanie was now resting in the great walnut-wood bed, with its guipure

coverlid, opposite the portrait of the "dear departed," whose guest she was. Perhaps she would know him in that world to which she was hurrying, now that she was useless on earth. She regretted nothing, save that her death did not take place two or three days earlier; but as it had not been permitted her to die in her beloved Convent, she was willing to die in a house like Madame Cottard's—a lodging for the poor. She already took an interest in those she had come amongst. Sister Alexandrine, who had told her about them so often, would bring them to her to-morrow. To-morrow? She felt so weary! Would she be here to-morrow?

Darkness fell. The only light in the room came from a candle-end left in its socket, and the only sound was Madame Henry's laboured breathing. In the tiny room next door, Sister Alexandrine and Sister Cécile were cooking on the little gas stove, while their old hostess, who had brought in the provisions, watched them. Some of her joyful, cordial activity seemed to have abated since the morning, and she was absorbed in anxious thought.

Supposing really that they were to get

into trouble? Supposing the Parish stopped the Doctor's visits, and the ten francs a month obtained after so much entreaty? The Sisters couldn't make it up. . . . It would be a question of defying Government, and what would two poor creatures like herself and her daughter be against such odds? Nuns and monks had been gobbled up in one mouthful! At any rate it was very foolhardy to have set oneself against the authorities. She felt her poor, timid soul, and her little, worn-out body giving way. Fear overpowered her; she needed an adviser. It was no good consulting Madame Henry; she was a saint who followed her conscience regardless of circumstances. And then she never left her arm-chair, and didn't understand the situation. It was better to turn to the eternal resource—a talk with a neighbour. The best thing would be to speak to Monsieur Legrand who was an accountant, almost a shopkeeper; he was rather conceited, but very kind all the same. He was sure to be at home at his dinner, for he was punctuality itself.

She put her cap straight and went down to his room.

Sister Alexandrine turned on the gas jet near the stove to look at Sister Cécile's face unobserved. She was satisfied. The recent emotions, so likely to upset a young girl, had not affected the little nun; her face looked as usual, a little sadder perhaps, but quite peaceful. There was no occasion to keep anything from her.

"Sister Cécile, we have been so busy to-day that I haven't had time to give you your letter." Sister Alexandrine drew a yellow envelope from her habit. "It came this morning, as we were leaving."

The young nun had not put out her hand to take it.

"Why do you give it to me and not to our Mother?"

"Our Mother is not in a state to look after you; and then, my child, it is time to make one thing plain to you."

Sister Cécile lifted her clear eyes to the woman who had been her nursing Mother in religion, and whose authority she still recognised amidst their changed surroundings. Sister Cécile did not feel out of her element; she was only a little peasant, and if she had stayed at home and her mother had lived, would have been busily cooking and clean-

ing. If her vocation had not called her to the Convent, she would have been a perfect housewife. Perhaps Sister Alexandrine thought of that.

"You are dispensed from all your vows," she proceeded, "obedience included. You may, in fact you must, in future act for yourself."

Sister Cécile made no objection, she merely said: "I would rather you read this letter, as I see it comes from Encarville; I only know one person there."

"Who?"

The little nun was not the least embarrassed.

"Joseph Berthaud, a young man from home, who once wanted to marry me."

"But why does he write to you?"

With the simplicity which all the novices of "La Providence" were taught, Sister Cécile answered—

"He must have heard we were being turned out, and he thinks I am coming back into the world."

Sister Alexandrine opened the letter and read it aloud—

"Mademoiselle Marguerite ——"

"How strange," remarked the little nun,

"I am so accustomed to the name of Cécile, that I forget I was ever called Marguerite."

"Mademoiselle Marguerite," resumed Sister Alexandrine, "perhaps you will be angry with me for writing to you, but I do not feel that I am doing anything disrespectful. It would have been worse to go and see you, and still I cannot refrain from the step I am taking. I cannot put it off either, for when you leave the Convent, I shall not know your address, nor whom to ask for it. I must not hope to see you back in your own home, for your father is more than ever under his wife's authority, and since you left she has grown more difficult to live with than ever. It seems that when she heard your Convent was closed, she said you had better not take it into your head to come home, as she would not let you cross the threshold. Mademoiselle Marguerite, forgive me for warning you : it is to spare you fresh trouble, and forgive me for what I am going to add. You know how hard I tried to resign myself to your wishes, and I would have been resigned for the rest of my life if you had remained a nun. But that is over ; you are forced to resume your liberty, and you must make another life for yourself.

Six years ago you told me that if you had not been attracted to higher things, you might have married, and that in that case you would not have thought me less fit than another to be your husband. I do not wish to importune you. What I want you to know is that my feelings have not altered, and that they never will. I am not one to take back what I have once offered. I remain as I have always been, and always shall be, your devoted, faithful, Joseph Berthaud. *P.S.*—My address is, as before, Château d'Encarville. I still look after the estate of Monsieur le Comte, and, in addition, I am overseer of the wood-cutting at Les Vignaux, which adds a good deal to my wages. I have a lodge to myself, with a garden all round it full of flowers."

Sister Alexandrine folded up the letter written on ruled paper, in the neat childish hand of a pupil of the Christian Brothers. She could see the writer—a good, sturdy, placid, Normandy peasant, a little above his class, hardworking and humble, worthy of a confidential position and an honest livelihood, and a good Catholic she was sure, for the delicacy and uprightness of true principle was apparent under all his expres-

sions. She even pictured the lodge, hidden in trees, part of the flourishing luxury of the Château, where nothing was wanting but a busy young wife to make a happy, prosperous, rustic home. A motherly impulse crossed her heart for the girl of twenty, checked in her course, and whose soul might feel the reaction of this brutally sudden change in her destiny. The poor little creature would soon be wanting shelter and perhaps food. Sister Alexandrine again scrutinised the youthful features under the cornette, which she was wearing for the last time. The little nun was graver than ever, and, though she still attended to her sauce-pans, was deep in thought. Then, when she had apparently made up her mind, she lifted up her sad blue eyes to Sister Alexandrine.

"That letter grieves me. I hoped that he had forgotten all that, and was married. He must be answered at once, so that he gets rid of all those ideas."

"And how shall we answer him?"

It never occurred to Sister Cécile that the drift of the letter could be in question. She thought the words were the only difficulty.

"Oh, I have it all ready in my head!" she

exclaimed. "It is his own expression, so he can't be hurt. Neither am I one to take back what I have once offered—and especially what has been offered to God."

Sister Alexandrine trembled with happiness, the first she had known for many days. In the simple girl she recognised a fellow-soul—brave, frank, and upright, proof against all attacks, and ready for any sacrifice. A further test could be applied.

"But, my dear child, how can you still be a nun outside the Convent, forced to leave off your habit, and perhaps to abandon us?"

"I shall do the same as you. Could you ever be anything but a nun?" answered Sister Cécile slyly.

"I am old."

Sister Cécile drew herself up. "Marriage is equally binding, whether one has been married one year or fifty—we ought to think of our vows like that," and she repeated, half unconsciously, the words of Joseph Berthaud, her countryman, identical in race and temperament: "I will be faithful for ever!"

Madame Henry's mother had crept quietly back, but she was so excited that she could

not conceal the cause of her agitation, and whilst they were dining at the little square table, covered in honour of the guests with a white cloth, and lit by a piece of candle to avoid the heat of the gas, she exclaimed with a sigh—

“Oh, if you only knew, Sisters, what has happened to that poor Monsieur Legrand! Will this dreadful Government spare no one? Good Lord, what is to become of us all? I have seen many things in my time, and I can remember the barricades of '98. The world was madder then perhaps than it is now, but not so wicked nor so silly!”

“What has happened to Monsieur Legrand?” asked Sister Alexandrine.

Madame Henry's mother began to sigh again. “This evening he came home like a lunatic. You know he is at a large draper's—it seems they supply all the Convents, orphanages, and schools, and now so many of them are closed, business is very bad. Some hands had been discharged, but they did not think things would go further. Just now they called the whole staff together and announced that the business was going to be wound up. That means thirty-five people

out of work! Monsieur Legrand had been there fourteen years like the others. Where will he get such another place? Not to speak of his savings, which are all in the business; and he mayn't even recover them! His wife used to set herself up; well, she may come to poverty now!" Her pity was tinged with selfishness. She had "come down," and so must others.

"Perhaps one could get Monsieur Legrand another place," said Sister Alexandrine with her usual energy, "but I should have to go and see Monsieur Duché, and I don't know when I can get out."

She anxiously turned to the bed where Sister Stéphanie still lay dozing. She had not been able to take any nourishment since morning. Her pulse was very low and her breathing hardly audible. Sister Alexandrine finished her sentence in a low voice—

"I haven't even been across the landing to see how Madame Quantin is getting on."

"Poor lady! She must be needing a little attention. Her husband takes no more notice of her than a dead dog! The last two nights he hasn't been home at all."

No more was said on account of Sister

Stéphanie. When the modest meal was over, the room had to be arranged for the night, with a truckle bed for Sister Cécile. Luckily two pairs of sheets were forthcoming, which the Sisters had provided last winter.

"I am like Madame Henry; I can sleep quite comfortably in an arm-chair—and that is quite a luxury for a nursing Sister," Sister Alexandrine had cheerfully announced.

The flickering light in the brass candlestick had gone out. Instead, a lovely beam of blue moonlight streamed through the half-open window, and brought with it a fresh breath of night air. On her narrow bed Sister Cécile lay soundly and dreamlessly asleep, looking peaceful and younger than ever, with her short, fair hair escaping from her linen cap.

Madame Henry leant back in her arm-chair in one of her rare intervals of relief, while her old mother gently snored in the depths of the recess.

Sister Alexandrine had watched by Sister Stéphanie's bedside during the early hours of the night, then, seeing her patient was quiet, she herself fell asleep.

The old Superior opened her eyes. At

first she could not remember where she was. She looked vainly round for the white walls of the cell where she had slept for forty years, and gazed at the moonlight shining on the brick floor. Gradually she remembered. Yes, this was the lodging of the poor. She had come to them, as they could no longer come to her. It mattered little to her, but what a difference it meant to them! She made a feeble effort to move under the heavy bed-clothes. Where were her boarders and sick people? How were they being taken care of? And the little children from the *crèche* and school—where would they go now? And what would they learn where they were sent? And the big boys from the Charity School? She even hankered after the naughty ones. Indeed she regretted them the most, because they needed kindness and protecting affection more than the others. Two big tears wetted her pillow. She dared not begin to cry again, she was too weak; it would kill her. But if her life was of no use to others, had not the time come to offer it to God? Her wrinkled eyelids closed, and heavy, slow drops began to flow, warm and steady, down her withered cheeks. She

could no longer retain them, and was past the effort. She ceased to notice her surroundings. She no longer felt the pain she had suffered all day. A gentle drowsiness stole over her. The paralysis which had numbed her extremities was creeping over her brain. Suddenly her waning faculties awoke; the instinct which had guided and directed her all her life moved her once more. She sat up and listened. In the silence of the night a cry was heard, a cry of pain which went to her heart, and she alone had heard it. It did not come from the room she was in, but from near by, penetrating the thin walls and the badly fastened doors and windows. The same instinct which had given back her hearing to the old nun, restored her memory and her reasoning powers. She guessed at once what had happened.

"Sister Alexandrine," she murmured, and in an instant the Sister was on her feet.

"What is it? Are you in pain, Mother?"

"No, it is not I; did you hear nothing?"

Sister Alexandrine thought she was wandering. Then she herself heard a faint moaning in the distance — the same idea came to her as to Sister Stéphanie.

"It is the poor woman on this landing."

"Yes; go and see." The Superior spoke with her old tone of firm decision. "Go quickly; pay no attention to me; it is she who wants your aid."

CHAPTER VII

TWO OR THREE

WHEN Monsieur Quantin came home at daybreak, the new-born baby, wrapped up in clothes lent by the Legrands, was lying on Sister Alexandrine's lap near the stove, which was alight in spite of the time of year. The new comer stopped on the threshold with manifest hesitation ; the room was overheated, and full of kind women neighbours. He had come at the wrong moment, and plainly regretted that he had not finished the night where he had begun it. However, before so many people he could not go back. He took off his hat, mechanically passed his hand over his hair and moustache, and came in.

In the grey, unflattering light, he looked shabby, dissipated, and ashamed. He tried to recall his long forgotten manners, and affect the air of the husband and man of the world. The women's air of hostility repelled him. He took refuge by the nun, and

looked at the little bundle Sister Alexandrine was rocking in her arms.

"What, already?" he exclaimed in a voice which he vainly tried to soften, "already? And how is my wife?"

"Madame Quantin has been very ill, but, thank God, all has gone well. She is asleep now."

Monsieur Quantin appeared charmed to hear of this sleep, which so simplified the part he had to play. He looked at the baby with an air of embarrassment.

"The little girl is very delicate," said Sister Alexandrine, lifting her up for her father to kiss. The latter went through the formality without enthusiasm.

"Not even a boy," he grumbled, already tired of being civil.

He dropped into the nearest chair, and Sister Alexandrine felt as if an atmosphere of sluggish degradation and vice surrounded her. The summer dawn brightened more and more, showing Monsieur Quantin's harassed, peevish face more plainly.

"How hot it is! unbearable!" he sighed.

He threw himself back in his chair, trying to suppress his yawns. He was tired out; his health as well as his morals had

given way in the life he led. The man was a wreck in every sense of the word. As a rich man he might have kept up certain outward decencies. Poverty he did not seem able to face with dignity; he had sunk to the lowest pleasures, others being out of his reach. When a windfall came he made the most of it, and never came home till his last farthing was gone. Then he would rave like a madman, or sleep like a pig, sure of finding some one to tyrannise over.

Sister Alexandrine read his whole history in the few moments he sat beside her, reeking of scent and tobacco, rolling his sleepy eyes, and impatiently stretching the brutal jaw which his emaciation made more prominent. Some domestic animals become ferocious in hunger—one could only pity him. He rose.

“I see I am useless or, worse still, in the way; I will come back later.”

Sister Alexandrine felt she ought to detain him.

“Don’t forget to register the child’s birth.”

“During the day—there’s no hurry.”

“Well, wait till Madame Quantin wakes.”

He refused. The Sister had an inspiration.

"Perhaps you would take something. At these times husbands are apt to be neglected, and yet anxiety and fatigue must tell on them. . . . I think there is some coffee here."

"Coffee? I should like some."

He sat down. Before he could draw back, the nun put the little bundle, with its tiny new-born head, into his arms.

"Hold your daughter, while I get your breakfast," she said in the abrupt voice which she sometimes used on purpose.

He held the child in a bewildered way, against his will. The Sister watched him furtively with a last gleam of hope. But he never raised to his lips the little creature, that, after all, was his own. He laid her on his knees and looked vaguely at her with a bored air. She was only a burden, like his wife, without compensation or attraction, and he had no money to support either. Perhaps he would have thought differently if he had been rich, but poverty had ulcerated his very soul. There was no good left in him, she could see; and it was best to let him go before the young mother saw him.

Sister Alexandrine came to take the child

from him. He hurriedly drank the coffee she offered him, and went up to the bed where his wife was sleeping. He took something out of a drawer near, pulled his overcoat from a hook, and left the room as he had entered it, under the furious gaze of the silent women.

"When will he come back?" wondered Sister Alexandrine to herself, as she tenderly rocked the little creature already so bereft of natural protection and love. She smiled with her old cheerfulness at the thoughts of her new task. "Fancy! yesterday morning when we were turned out of our poor old Convent, I was wondering what to do!"

She was still there at mid-day. Presently some one knocked and called gently, "Sister!" She recognised Sister Cécile's voice and joined her on the landing. Sister Cécile had already put off her habit. In her plain black dress, with a little white cap on her pretty fair hair, she looked once more the little village girl. But there was a spiritual expression in her face which recalled some of the little rustic girl-saints of the past—the gentle shepherdess Eustelle, or Germaine de Pibrac.

"You must come away, Sister," she said quietly. "They have come to move us again. It seems that three nuns together make a community. I met the gentlemen downstairs, and prevented them coming up to frighten Mother. She is so weak, so *very* weak this morning."

Sister Alexandrine went down. In the courtyard the witnesses of yesterday's quarrel were assembled round the two men; the lodgers looked at them aggressively, while Madame Cottard, on the contrary, standing as usual in the doorway, newspaper in hand, welcomed them with a smile. With her almost military courage Sister Alexandrine went straight up to the enemy and addressed the commissary, for she was beginning to recognise police officers.

"Sir, we were turned out of our house yesterday. Our Order is suppressed—all we possessed is sequestered. We are not at home, but with friends who have given us temporary shelter. What more is expected of us? Why are we pursued here?"

The commissary was a commoner man than the last one, a great burly fellow, accustomed to terrorise over pick-pockets and vagrants.

"You are living in community," he explained with no further preamble, "and defying the law of 1901 against unauthorised associations."

"Our community is dispersed."

"I see it has re-assembled. How many of you are in this house?"

"Are we obliged to give the police an account of our private actions?"

The labourers and the washerwomen, home for their dinner, joined the assembled lodgers. The Legrands, no longer proud, had come out like the Bréchets. Monsieur Legrand, a great talker, even tried to interfere.

"That's true, personal liberty is sacred."

"Be quiet," said the officer rudely. "Will you kindly tell me, Madame, how many nuns are here?"

"We are no longer nuns if our Order does not exist, and we are even dispensed from our vows."

"Then what does this mean?" and with his great ringed hand he touched Sister Alexandrine's white cornette.

She drew back with a haughty movement, and an expression which no one present, not even Sister Cécile, had ever seen on

her face. For an instant she was transformed.

"I have not had time to put off my habit, Monsieur," she replied. "If that is also an infringement of your law, you can make a note of it."

The commissary paid no attention to this remark, but returned to the original grievance.

"Any association of more than two persons comes under the law against congregations. And there are three of you here, Madame."

"Yes, three of us. This young girl who looks upon me as a mother, our dying Superior, and myself—her nurse; which of us is to be turned out?"

The commissary wasted no more words; he folded up his papers, bowed slightly, and replaced his hat.

"All that we can do for you, Madame, is to allow you twenty-four hours' notice. You will please take steps in that time to conform to the law."

With that the two officials withdrew. They were only stragglers from the pack that yesterday were let loose on the Convent, but enough had been done to alarm

the whole lodging-house. Madame Henry's trembling old mother kept repeating—

“If only they don't stop our parish relief.”

Madame Legrand scolded her husband. “You will get into trouble yourself with the authorities, and perhaps to-morrow you will have to ask them for work, if you can't get it without!”

Régine Bréchet was scowling at the “poachers.”¹ She marched upstairs scornfully, dragging her ragged petticoats after her and muttering: “A lot I care for the Government—it's never given me bread to eat. I am independent.”

Sister Alexandrine and Sister Cécile had already regained their precarious shelter, and Madame Cottard was once more absorbed in her newspaper. She was still reading the leading article, which required serious attention, so that its full meaning could be grasped.

“The clerical plot! It's hard all the same, after all that we have done to defend ourselves,” she said sorrowfully. She stopped at the next paragraph, struck by a new idea. “Perhaps there really is some mistake; the Jesuits weren't the most dan-

¹ *Froussard*, French slang.

gerous. Nuns are worse. They go everywhere; they get round people by doing good, and the more good they do, the more dangerous they are."

By a singular optical delusion, Madame Cottard lost sight of the well-known figure of the modest, frieze-clad woman who had passed her so often, bringing help, or at least a smile to every one. She forgot what she had seen and heard only last night in her own house. Her newspaper came between her and the reality; she could only see the vile caricature of a nun, drawn by an unknown, treacherous hand, and was blind to the original before her eyes. It never occurred to her to use her own common sense. She contented herself with repeating the profound axiom so as not to forget it: "The more good nuns do, the more dangerous they are, and the more urgent it becomes to suppress them." And her puzzled face grew bright. The danger would soon be over for this house. Luckily the three were together, they had been caught, and would soon be gone.

But the day was not to end without more complications. Towards evening two other visitors arrived, very different from those of

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the morning. They also asked to see the nuns; one was the vicar of the parish, and the other looked like a sacristan. Although Madame Cottard was little versed in religious practices herself, she knew what this meant.

"Is the old woman upstairs worse?" she said to herself, disgusted at a fresh intrusion; "am I going to have the undertakers in next?"

The priest's business with Sister Stéphanie was soon over. Everything is very simple with Sisters of Charity. They have given themselves to the service of others, and their private concerns count for little in life or death. They are not allowed, even for a day, to dwell upon any affection or sorrow of their own. It might take the place of some distress they could relieve.

"Monsieur l'Abbé," asked Sister Alexandrine, as she was showing the priest out, "have you the necessary authorisation to baptize our next door neighbour's baby?"

The moral atmosphere of the dying was not so different from that of the new-born as might be imagined. One was gently leaving that life which the other had entered under such sad auspices, and the latter was the

more to be pitied. Monsieur Quantin had not returned. Instead of relations, friends, and servants, only neighbours had assembled, as in the houses of the poor. An old woman had taken Sister Alexandrine's place as nurse. The mother was in a state of semi-collapse. She had lain prostrate all day, accepting dumbly and half unconsciously the ministrations of those around her. She had not noticed her husband's inexplicable absence. Was she at least mentally at peace? Sister Alexandrine feared not; she understood Madame Quantin's disposition. She had one of those dogged, passionate natures that cannot shake off any kind of pain, and whose bodily sufferings never stifle their mental ones. The young mother was probably brooding over her dreadful circumstances and dreading the future. A stray word roused her. They were talking of the baptism.

"Is my baby in danger?" she asked with a start.

"No; but we are going to keep her from taking cold. It is so hot out of doors, and the churches are so draughty."

But this did not deceive Madame Quantin. Her gloomy expression returned as she

pressed the infant in her arms. It was all she had on earth, and its life was already threatened. She smiled bitterly as she gave it to Sister Alexandrine for the short ceremony.

"Her father isn't even here!" she said.

She was draining the bitter cup to the dregs. The hasty lugubrious baptism at night in the wretched lodging, with only charitable strangers present, cruelly emphasised the gap between the past and the sordid present. The child's future looked more hopeless than that of a begger or a foundling. Sister Alexandrine's courageous cheerfulness was the only bright spot.

"What are you going to call the dear little girl?"

"I haven't thought. I don't know."

The priest was waiting. "Well, your name, Yvonne, is so pretty."

"Oh, not mine! I think it's unlucky."

"Your mother's, then?"

"It was the same, and she died young, so you see I am right."

Sister Alexandrine did not try to argue about superstition, nor did she think it necessary to inquire what were likely names in Monsieur Quantin's family.

"I should like her to be called Jeanne, after my Aunt du Plessis." For the first time she smiled, and a faint colour crept into her cheeks.

The priest had poured the water of purification over the little head, and the new-born Christian was named Jeanne, after Madame du Plessis. They gave her back to her mother, and as Sister Alexandrine looked at them both, she recalled the tender saying of her old Superior about the birds of the air. Here was another—a poor little sparrow of the housetop. It was well Sister Stéphanie could not see it, nor the poor weak mother in the abandoned nest. She who had passed her life in relieving distress, would have grieved too bitterly to know such hopeless misery was so near at hand. Thoughts like this were killing the old nun.

The doctor could find no disease in her, and he prescribed no remedy. The violent shock had shattered her frail life, already preserved beyond expectation, and she might die at any moment. Sister Alexandrine was now going back to sit up with her, perhaps for the last time. She turned round as she was leaving the room. Madame Quantin

was whispering: "Jeanne . . . Jeanne." A touch of fever brightened her eyes and cheeks; the charm of youth, eclipsed by so many months of suffering, revived in the smile which had lingered round her lips ever since she had pronounced Madame du Plessis's name. What did her smile mean? It could not be called up by the reality. In her weakness a kind of half-delirium had set in. She forgot her dreadful existence, and imagined that all was well. She was no longer forsaken in a horrible garret; she was beloved and happy in the home she had once hoped for; she had never left it. Monsieur Quantin had never existed, and those she had lost had not died. Madame du Plessis was there to cherish her, and the little Jeanne she had just given her—not only as her godchild, but by a dearer name. Madame Quantin unconsciously betrayed her secret—the secret she had not outwardly confessed in all her revelations, perhaps not even to her own heart. She had chosen the name of Jeanne in memory of the beloved past and the illusion of the present. Robert's daughter would have been called Jeanne after his mother.

"She loves him still," said Sister Alex-

andrine to herself, "and she will love him for ever."

All night, as she sat by her old companion in her last hours, the beautiful, unconscious face haunted her, and she heard the murmur, "Jeanne . . . Jeanne!" The nun felt desolate. Everything that could wound and afflict her soul had been crowded into the last few days: she had seen old age persecuted, infancy abandoned, justice outraged, and distress vainly seeking shelter. Was it an echo of the past, or the boundless pity that a heart anchored on God feels for the horrible suffering of a soul in peril, that prevented Sister Alexandrine from judging as the world judges? For what moved her most, among so many sorrows, was the mysterious and incurable pain of love.

The officer was punctual to his appointment. He arrived at twelve, as on the day before. This time he was allowed to go upstairs into Sister Stéphanie's room; there was no longer any danger of disturbing her. Sister Alexandrine and Sister Cécile pointed to one end of the room. Two candles burnt near the bed. In one corner, by Madame Henry's arm-chair, Régine Bréchet was sobbing bitterly. Little Louis and Madeleine

were there, and sobbed, too, without knowing why; perhaps some human intuition taught them to weep for her who had herself wept so bitterly at the loss of her poor.

"You see, Monsieur le Commissaire," said Sister Alexandrine, "that although we were three, we are now only two!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FUTURE

EVERY day, however sublime and agonising, must end; the future must be faced and lived through in spite of all. A week after their departure from "La Providence," the nuns moved again. They found a lodging a little farther along the same street; it was just as humble as Madame Henry's, but they would be in no one's way. They had felt no bitterness at the discreet hints which their old hostess had conveyed in respectful language. Only people living in the world still have illusions about gratitude. One thing only gave Sister Alexandrine pain, and that was when little Sister Cécile asked if they were still to stay in Paris. Where else could they go, and what could they do elsewhere? Paris was Sister Alexandrine's world and her whole life. She would no more have thought of leaving it, than an old farmer would forsake the fields he has toiled

over, in good and bad seasons, for forty years. The worse the weather and the more sterile the soil, the harder he works for his reward. In the great field of Paris the labourers neither rest nor stop. There are always new furrows to trace, new seed to sow, a possible harvest to reap. And life passes in going from one task to another; the woes of others take hold on the heart of the worker, and establish their claim. The perpetual presence of human misery is a gigantic pledge, and to forsake the work of assuaging it, when once undertaken, is base desertion.

"Well, we will stay as long as we can," Sister Cécile would say, with the rustic archness into which she would sometimes relapse. Sister Alexandrine would not hear of any compromise. Was not everything possible to those who were really determined to do all for the love of God? Otherwise, what would have become of the founders of the Order, and of all the nuns who had taken up the same kind of work for centuries—Sisters of Charity, or Mercy and Little Sisters of the Poor? They went everywhere looking for orphans, the old, the sick, and the infirm; they helped and sheltered those

whom the rich would not support, nor the Government provide for.

When they were at "La Providence," did any one ever ask if things were "possible"? Did they ever consider the future, even in starting good works? And were they to think of themselves *now*? When Sister Cécile, who was the treasurer, warned Sister Alexandrine that funds were already getting low, Sister Alexandrine would answer—

"God will provide. What really worries me, my dear child, is that poor old Bréchet with his sciatica, and our little friend, Madame Quantin. . . . She is on my mind, and I must make time to go round and see her this evening."

The days were as full as before, and more tiring. After all the outdoor activity there was not the peace of the Convent to return to, and the guiding support of the Rule was wanting. They went on working to the utmost, but in difficulty and isolation, without the powerful incentive of community life; and their attempts to cling together did not give them even a momentary illusion of their past life. Each time Sister Alexandrine came back from her expeditions across Paris she felt more and more tired and

disheartened. The nuns met furtively at their different lodgings, or in friends' houses, so as not to attract the notice of the police, and some of them became almost silly over the puerile precautions they took. These sly, secret movements were against the frank, courageous spirit of the Order, and the Sisters had not even the chance of displaying heroism in danger.

They and their friends only risked discussions, and the state of things was just enough to damp their energies instead of rousing them. This was exactly the aim of those who had organised this persecution, in which the weapons were fines and summonses. The persecutors calculated on the depressing effects of a daily struggle against petty worries and attacks, limits to thought and action, discomfort, poverty leading to starvation, and at last inevitable shrinkage. They profited by their ancestors' experiences in '93. They knew that martyrs are very troublesome folk to get rid of, and that when once the axe has been set going, it has a queer knack of cutting off the judges' heads after the victims'.

In the course of civilisation, methods of warfare grow more refined. Violence gives

way to ingenuity. It is useless to aim at the lives of those who have to be safely got rid of. It is wiser to stop their liberty and resources at one blow, and then gradually to sap their influence and energy. The closing of the Convent had only been the beginning of the ordeal—what followed was far harder to bear. Not that any voluntary desertion was to be feared. On the contrary the nuns daily showed the most noble example. But the treasures of faith and charity were wasted, now they were not applied to their appointed uses. When once the tie that had bound souls together so long and so firmly was sundered, each one resumed her natural characteristics. Some were overwhelmed with petty cares; others, freed from daily tasks, soared up like ill-directed balloons into unwholesome mysticism. Sister Lawrence, thinner than ever and with glowing eyes, spent hours prostrate in dark churches, invoking the Divine vengeance, whilst other younger nuns, dreading the future, offered themselves as housekeepers. Those who had gone back to their families succumbed to home influence, and, as they mixed with former companions, the difference of surroundings and education, so

long obliterated by the spirit of their Order, made itself felt. The noble spirit of upright simplicity, perfect union, and serene devoted courage, the unmistakable spirit of "La Providence," which could adapt itself to the most dissimilar natures, affiliate them, and group them together, was bound to be lost before long. The uniformity of opinion and ideas imposed by the Rule must evaporate when it was no longer encouraged by a life in common. The habit had not only been put off from their bodies, but its impress was fading from their souls.

Sister Alexandrine saw all this, and suffered accordingly; she felt that these symptoms of disintegration could only end fatally. A worse disaster impended than the official suppression of the Order; its spiritual collapse was near. No doubt valiant nuns like Sister Cécile, herself, and many others, would remain in the breach to the last—but only to die.

"We must be content to die bravely after making a good use of the time that remains to us," she thought to herself, as she came out of the railway station into the light and air, after one of the mysterious meetings at the other end of Paris.

As she crossed the bridge she drew a long breath, and inhaled the breeze off the river. She was always anxious to get back to her old quarter. There she used not to waste time in these long, useless expeditions. She had her regular district, her poor, her friends; she was known wherever she went. She was still "Sister Alexandrine" in spite of laws, decrees, and the kind of abdication conveyed by her lay dress. But that, like all else, was a grief to her. Her badly fitting black coat and skirt, and uncomfortable bonnet, felt like a silly, tiresome disguise. She had lost her individuality without succeeding in looking like other people; she could see it in the eyes of passers-by, and in the sad or surprised expression of her friends when they met her. Only one person did not pay any attention to the transformation, and that was Madame Quantin.

"You are always yourself, Sister, and that's enough," she had said with a look of love that always went to Sister Alexandrine's heart. She had not wanted for respect and affection in her long life as a nun, but love had rarely blossomed in her arduous path. Since she entered the Convent she had only seen it in the changing

faces of children, with their perpetual kisses ; and in them it was an unconscious, passing, superficial feeling, often dictated by interested habit. But Yvonne Quantin was different. With her it was real and deep ; long suppressed and just finding expression. The mother's soul had been frozen and numbed by sorrow, and the child had brought new life into her desolate heart. Vitality even showed itself in the poor room which Sister Alexandrine now entered.

Its poverty no longer looked hopeless. The ingenious elegance of a lady could be traced in the spotless order and clever arrangement of everything. The few relics of the past showed to good advantage, and the family portraits no longer looked out of their element. The Marquise, in her "three-decker" head-dress, seemed to say to her neighbour, the powdered Marquis in his grey and rose coloured uniform, "We are back in our days of emigration !" Indeed the young wife herself looked an exile from a far country, as she sat in the old tapestry arm-chair, slender and dainty in her light dressing-gown, holding on her knees a mass of white silk and lace.

No one could have hoped for such a

wonderful change in Madame Quantin. Her youth seemed to have vigorously reasserted itself, bringing back not only health but beauty, and that full bloom which so often accompanies early maternity.

"You are allowed to get up, but not to work yet," said Sister Alexandrine in playful rebuke. "What are you making, if I may ask?" she said more gently as she sat down.

"I am trying an experiment, making my baby's first frock, and trying if I haven't grown too awkward, whilst I was idle for so many months. Perhaps I can be of some practical use." The voice sounded grave. She was not only the young mother, playing with thimble and scissors in her weak hands; a new energy had awakened in her; she had determined to try and help herself and conquer all her sorrows. There, in a cradle close by, lay the delicate baby who would need such care in bringing up. The mere hope of rearing it was enough for the mother to live on. Nature had swept all else aside. Ruined, forsaken, outcast, she could still rejoice in her motherhood, and Sister Alexandrine felt touched by the miracle, though she saw it happen every day.

Madame Quantin showed her the white lace over soft silk, forming a transparent smock with tiny sleeves.

"Do you know where I got it from?" she said proudly, without a trace of bitterness; "it is an old ball dress that belonged to me as a girl." Strips of white silk strewn the ground, a garland of moss roses was still fastened to the slender bodice, and Sister Alexandrine could see Yvonne as she had looked in the dress when the flowers were fresh—Yvonne as a young girl, with all her illusions of love and happiness.

Perhaps Madame Quantin could not quite banish memory herself, for she pushed aside the useless cuttings with her foot as she repeated: "I must be practical. I must learn how to keep myself and baby, now that I am *sure* there will be no one else to look to." She emphasised the last words, and Sister Alexandrine understood.

"Have you had news at last?"

Nothing had been said on the subject for nearly a month since Monsieur Quantin's extraordinary disappearance, which, however, had surprised his wife very little. He had taught her to be patient under everything, and she very calmly opened

a drawer to take out a letter which she handed to Sister Alexandrine.

"You can read it; do read it! I have no secrets from you."

She kept her clear eyes fixed on Sister Alexandrine as the latter read the letter and gave it back with a sigh. Alas! there was no need of explanation. The letter might have been copied from a "Polite Letter-writer," for the use of all those who habitually trade on charity, pity, or sentiment. Inflated periods, sickly pathos, loathsome affectation, vainly strove together to simulate real pathos. Monsieur Quantin vaguely accused and pitied himself. He confessed his faults and his misfortunes. He alluded to an exceptional opportunity of retrieving his fortunes in a distant exile—a sacrifice to the happiness of those belonging to him, which wounded pride alone prevented him from explaining. The letter did not contain one sincere or really heartfelt word—it was a clumsy, stupid "dodge," incapable of deceiving the simplest.

"You think as I do, that he has never left Paris?" asked the young wife calmly.

"I fear not."

"In any case he cannot come back here."

She hesitated. "I don't know whether to think of it as a misfortune or not, Sister," she continued in a low voice; "I don't know where my duty lies. I swear I have always done my duty. My only fault was marrying as I did; and I would have atoned for that if he had let me. I could have given even him much affection and devotion."

Poor little Yvonne was one of those women who are shy of putting real feeling into words. She had laid bare her sorrows, her regrets, her anger, everything, before she could open those depths of her heart which still held hidden treasures. Sister Alexandrine had only guessed at them during the intimacy of these last few weeks. To-day she was really the confidant for the first time.

"I always longed so for some one to love," the girl went on in a low, passionate voice; "I lost my parents early. At the Convent I grew so fond of the girls and the mistresses, that it was a wrench each time I had to part with them. Then you know the story of my great sorrow, and how I really gave my whole heart, and it was thrown away. I have always lost what I loved—always! Do you know why I have begun to revive

lately? Because my baby can't prevent my devotion to her now, and later, perhaps, she will still let me love her. It might be possible or even likely; because after all she is my child, isn't she? She may grow up like me. I should have adored my mother."

She had taken up little Jeanne, and was covering her with kisses. As Sister Alexandrine watched them, she no longer dreaded that weakness or discouragement would overpower the young mother; she trusted in the forces of maternity, ready to overflow with life and intensity. But at the same time she felt more anxious than ever about Monsieur Quantin. Was there anything more to hope from a man who had not pitied such submission, and who had tired out such passionate abnegation?

"How could he help loving you?" she murmured.

"Never mind me — why does he not love his child?" The wife drew herself up; her eyes blazed. "I could forgive him all the past; I would even forgive his cold, cowardly desertion of me (since he doesn't want to support me and could not even bear the strain of my ill-health), if he had only

left me before ; but what I cannot forget is that he came here and saw his child ; he held her in his arms, and then left us for ever."

"Pardon knows no conditions," said the nun, and, as the young wife made no answer, "Do you know where Monsieur Quantin is?" she asked.

"Oh, I have no idea. We have always led such separate lives that I never tried to find out anything about him. It was not from negligence, Sister, believe me, but from a sense of duty ; I can't say of respect."

Sister Alexandrine sighed again. Still she felt bound to persist in her charitable efforts at reconciliation.

"And is there no one who has any influence over him, no one who could bring him back?"

"No one that I know of. After our marriage he alienated the few relations I had—he had already quarrelled with his own. And, lately, as you know, he was always out."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know. I couldn't go out, and only saw you. As I had never lived in Paris I had no friends here, since my Aunt du Plessis' death."

She stopped. She remembered *some one*, in spite of the moral barrier dividing them—her sole surviving relation ; the man to whom she had given all the passion of her first and only love. Since then she had cursed and despised him. As an innocent young girl, she had tried to banish even his memory. Would her experience as an unhappy wife weaken her resolve? Would she draw a parallel between the false lover and the faithless husband and father, and would a sort of unmerited rehabilitation be the result?

“Supposing she begins thinking of poor Robert again,” mused Sister Alexandrine anxiously. “Supposing by some accident they meet and he sees her, so beautiful and so unhappy!” She assumed her brusque manner. “Would you like me to try and find Monsieur Quantin and speak to him, and try to bring him back? Little Jeanne needs a father.”

The mother had put the child back into the cradle and taken up her work again.

“He will be a bad father,” she said dispassionately, but without hesitation ; “he has proved that already, hasn’t he? My little Jeanne would suffer as I have, and I

mean to prevent that, as I have a right to do. And I really need peace myself to recover my strength; I have my child's health to consider."

"It won't be such easy work as she thinks," muttered Sister Alexandrine as she left the little home which she still considered in danger. "However worthless he may be, this Quantin is the husband and father and her indispensable protector. If I only knew how to get hold of him—even by the ears!" Her thoughts turned again to Madame Quantin: "She is the same age as Sister Cécile, though she seems older; but what a difference between them!"

Her mind was full now of Sister Cécile, that other child of her heart, still so young, but so far above all human passions! She seemed as steadfast as the old nun herself; peacefully anchored in her vocation, and only remembering her youth as a drawback. With her sweet face surrounded by cropped golden hair, Sister Cécile attracted too much attention to go out much alone, or even to accompany Sister Alexandrine on her expeditions. She preferred stopping in the house, sewing, embroidering, or cleaning the rooms—a perpetual smile on her lips; and

more than ever that evening did Sister Alexandrine rejoice at the thought of her smiling face.

But a disappointment was in store for her. Sister Alexandrine turned the young girl's face to the waning light and gazed steadily at her.

"You have been crying."

Sister Cécile could not tell an untruth; she was silent. Sister Alexandrine felt a pang at her heart. Was this child of many hopes troubled at last in her serene courage? Was she going to be turned back by the obstacles that had overcome so many? But Sister Cécile thought that perfect obedience and frankness demanded an answer.

"I cried—it was very silly—because I heard two little girls downstairs saying their lessons, and it reminded me of the children in my class. I said to myself that I should never again do the work I loved—of bringing up children for the dear Lord. It grieved me—but it is over now."

"No, it is not over," said Sister Alexandrine sadly, "and it cannot be forgotten." There is no consolation for being thwarted in a true vocation. Whether a vocation

be sublime or ordinary, the suffering is the same. Vocation is the call of love, divine or human; and those hearts break, which are prevented from responding to it. This it was that killed Sister Stéphanie, and almost ended Yvonne Quantin's life.

Sister Cécile's angelic soul was bearing its share now.

"And I?" Sister Alexandrine asked herself, "shall I die when I can no longer follow my vocation?"

CHAPTER IX

THE RECKONING

THE Eve of All Souls fell in dreary, foggy weather, and even the flowers seemed sad. They were but too plainly destined to fade in cemeteries, and only the idea of mourning could be associated with the chrysanthemums to be seen everywhere. Shop windows and barrows were full of them ; poor people, old men, widows (though some of them were people who only buy flowers once a year), each carried a basketful. Pervading sadness was written on every face, and general languor prevailed.

A cold wind seemed the forerunner of winter, which looked implacably long and hard viewed from such a beginning. Such shabby people as seem more numerous in cold weather, walked along, already bending their heads before the future frost. It was a depressing day, and Sister Alexandrine tried to think that exterior conditions alone

were responsible for her unusual languor and fatigue.

"There is nothing to feel so disheartened about," she repeated to herself, "nothing! It is only ten o'clock; I have the whole day before me. I shall get on all right."

She started on her way again. She had already trudged over the Paris pavements once that morning as well as the day before, and the day before that; though she was even now reproaching herself with leaving things till the last, and not taking the alarm earlier.

"But I never had such ill-luck before," she admitted. "People all away, or else refusals. What can it mean?" She had just left the Doynels' house. Monsieur Doynel was shooting grouse in Scotland, and Madame Doynel shivering on the lake-shore, in the pursuance of that aristocratic pastime. No one had their correct address. "Where am I to go now?" thought Sister Alexandrine, as she stood hesitating on the pavement, among dead leaves off all the trees in the avenue in whirling heaps. Madame Clamereux was taking a cure in Austria. Kind Monsieur Duché was seriously ill, and dying in the country. The owners of Châteaux, shoot-

ing men, every one connected with sport or society, were still away. In some of the houses, instead of saying "Every one is away," the servants said, "Every one is out"; in that unmistakable voice, which, in case the visitor should return, had no intention of answering, "They have come home."

"But what is it? What is the matter?" repeated Sister Alexandrine to herself. She felt a strange fatality hanging over her, beyond the usual obstacles in her path. The avenues seem longer and longer to her tired feet, and all the clocks were certainly fast. She ventured on the extravagance of a tram ride. There was only room on the end platform. Hitherto when such had been the case, some inside male passenger had risen, and begged her to take his place. Now no one moved. She remained standing, jerking against her neighbours, shivering under her worn jacket, and inhaling the tobacco smoke which the wind blew in her face. "I have summer clothes on," she reflected, "and there doesn't seem much chance of my buying any others."

For the last two months Sister Cécile had been marvellously economical, but charity had swallowed up all their surplus. Could

they keep anything for themselves in the face of the terrible want around them? At last the generous givers who had undertaken to support the nuns themselves, grew tired of throwing their money into such a sieve. They had not calculated on the nuns still wishing to give alms. They could give each other no mutual help. At least half the Providence nuns had left Paris, and the others were in great poverty. Privations had made Sister Lawrence look more like a Desert-Saint than ever. Two old nuns had been taken into the infirmary of another Order. Those who had gone back to their families, even when these were rich, had no personal independence or means. Want had perhaps never been so general. The financial crisis, which always follows a political one, bore heavily on trade; business was very slack, particularly in small industries. Those firms which depended on the custom of large religious establishments, had collapsed when the nuns and monks were proscribed, and their convents closed.

Among Sister Alexandrine's poor people catastrophes multiplied. In the house in the Rue de Buci alone, one of the plasterers had a fatal fall from a scaffolding, leaving a

widow and children unprovided for ; one of the washerwomen had severe inflammation of the lungs, and Madame Henry's illness, so long chronic, suddenly became very serious, and the parish doctor could not cure her. He was not able to cure old Bréchet's sciatica either—the most he could do was to set the old man on his feet, so that he could drag himself to the public-house.

“Better have left him in his bed,” grumbled Régine.

The result of which state of affairs was that on the 15th of October last, Madame Cottard had most of her applications for rent returned unpaid, and it was only the fact of this being the rule, and not the exception, that prevented her from putting in an execution which would have practically emptied the house. A fortnight's grace was allowed to the lodgers, and she made up for this concession by constant bickering and abuse. She sat in her ground-floor lair like a dog in its kennel, waiting to spring and bite, and Madame Henry's old mother only dared to pass it when she was absolutely obliged to go to the chemist or the baker.

The last delay expired on the 1st of

November, the next day, and many had been the sleepless nights in consequence. A hundred francs here, fifty there, at least five hundred in all, were needed to appease the harridan, and to prevent a general exodus! The alternative was, that in forty-eight hours the poor creatures would be wandering about the streets, their hardly acquired furniture seized, and themselves forced to seek for other lodgings. The poor furniture that they were so proud of, and the loss of which, in many cases, meant the loss of self-respect, courage, and energy as well; it bore witness to that honest, hard-working life which was so difficult to begin again! The bailiff's hammer marking out walnut or pine cupboards, cane chairs, sewing machines, and the regulation red-bordered table-cloth used for great days, strikes the knell of so much honest happiness!

Will not a really liberal and parental Government some day put an end to this barbarous law, and let the poor keep the necessities of life, rather than drive them to envy others, whilst they are being mocked with an illusion of future prosperity?

The nun, as she stood shivering in

the fog on the tramway-platform, thought of Yvonne Quantin. The young wife's courage had held out so far. She had worked all day and often half the night at starvation wages, for which others were stretching out hands as little accustomed to work as her own. And her scanty earnings being insufficient to keep her and her delicate baby, she had not shrunk from the last humiliation of all—harder for her than sleepless nights of toil, and only faced for the child's sake : she had written to her guardian ! And with what result ? Sister Alexandrine had read his letter, which was as insincere as Monsieur Quantin's, and more exasperating. The guardian pretended to consider the wife as untrustworthy as the husband, in order that his meanness might pass for indignation.

Madame Quantin had bravely written again in other directions, but the answer was the same everywhere. Monsieur Quantin had been beforehand in each instance, begging, complaining, borrowing, cheating, and abusing his wife. The most generous giver sent a nominal sum that he might have the right to say, "This must be final."

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This painfully acquired money did not suffice even to pay the rent, and the night before, as little Jeanne lay tossing and coughing in her cradle, Yvonne had suddenly turned her feverishly bright eyes on Sister Alexandrine, exclaiming—

“Rather than see that child turned out, I would do, I know not what!” Then growing more and more excited: “I shall wait till the last moment, but if the bailiffs really come I shall stop at nothing for my child. I shall write to the only man who can refuse me nothing. It’s horrible, but I don’t care. Motherhood is an excuse for everything. I shall write, ‘I myself do not count, I ask in the name of your mother and for my child.’ But I think the shame of it will kill me.” She began to sob, and the nun tried in vain to turn her thoughts into another channel.

“Don’t fret so; you shall come to my lodgings.”

Yvonne shook her head. Sister Alexandrine’s fate seemed as uncertain as her own.

“And she is right,” Sister Alexandrine admitted to herself. “I shall very likely be turned out next month. Well, I am

accustomed to that. The important thing is that others should not suffer. I promised to get them out of their trouble." They all counted on her, and still were hopeful. "Am I going to fail them?" thought the nun in dismay.

At eleven o'clock the tram-car set her down at the Boulevard St. Germain. A kind of superstition drew her to her old neighbourhood. But she had no time for experiments; she must risk a bold attempt.

She decided on her last attempt, as she turned up the Rue du Bac and the Rue de Grenelle, where she had been only the day before. She stopped before the gate where she had paid a visit of condolence a year ago, and went resolutely in. The little Louis XVI. house at the bottom of the garden looked peaceful enough. The chrysanthemums, which seemed everywhere on this particular day, were growing here in a round pot near the entrance. Nothing was changed. The door opened; the nun went in—

"Monsieur Robert du Plessis?"

The young butler who had replaced old François, scrutinised the intruder.

"Monsieur le Comte has just gone out."

"The lodge-keeper told me he was at

home. Ask if he will see me ; I have no card. Say it is Sister Alexandrine."

"Sister Alexandrine?" repeated the man with a surprised look at the black jacket, the bonnet, the black thread gloves.

For many reasons Sister Alexandrine remembered her visitor of the year before. Now she saw him again she noticed a slight change in him. The Deauville season had not agreed with him. As for Robert himself, he felt a modified form of his servant's amazement. His recollection of Sister Alexandrine was of a nun in white cornette and guimpe, with a large rosary hanging over her ample skirts. This poor woman, looking shabby and countrified in his luxurious room, recalled nothing, and he had to make an effort of memory and sentiment. He had already half forgotten the law of expulsion, the persecution, and his mother's connection with "La Providence"; these things had faded into the dim past. What a strange idea for a nun to call suddenly on a bachelor in his own house! Luckily the arm-chair he drew up for her had its back to a Fragonard, hung since Madame du Plessis' death, and to some photographs which had certainly not stood

on the writing-table a year ago. But she did not seem embarrassed by these trifles; perhaps because other thoughts pre-occupied her. She explained the situation at once.

"You must be rather surprised, Monsieur, to see me return the visit you paid to our Convent three months ago. You can never come back to 'La Providence,' Monsieur! Of course you know our house is closed?"

Robert du Plessis did not like to own that although he had felt indignant with the law in general, he had not taken the trouble to remember individuals.

"Yes, I was very sorry to hear it. Good heavens, where will it end?" he exclaimed in his cold, well-bred voice, and correct conventional manner. The typical representative of a long line of ancestors, he was allied to his forebears by distinction of manner and mind, but his modern scepticism had diluted their fervent convictions and solid principle. He was the link between a sturdy bygone generation, and a brutal present one. Detached, to his cost, from the one, and annihilated by the other, he was destined to suffer himself and to wound others. Sister Alexandrine had guessed what he was from Yvonne Quantin's confidences,

and her own opinion was confirmed as she watched the young man's face in the dull winter daylight, worn and tired in spite of its conventional smile, and noted the nervous gesture of the hand that twisted his fair moustache, and then fell languidly at his side. The poor man seemed neither happy nor at peace. Did he regret the past, or feel a want in his existence? Robert did not realise, as the conversation dragged laboriously along, that his visitor was such a good psychologist.

"We are not the most to be pitied, Monsieur. Our poor are the worst off. Forgive me speaking to you of them. You have already proved that they interest you."

He bowed coldly, feeling that an appeal was coming, and that his generosity had been abused. Sister Alexandrine guessed his thoughts.

"Perhaps you regret what you did, now you see me here. It is true that I ought not to have come, but everything is relative, Monsieur. I have seen so much suffering around me, that it makes me disregard the embarrassing position in which I am placing you, as well as myself."

Robert noticed that she spoke like a

woman of the world, but the impression passed. The sound of wheels in the courtyard reminded him that he had an appointment with a friend.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I am not a very useful benefactor, Sister. I made a point of giving you my alms for the year, so as to make sure that I should not spend them by mistake. What with claims of farmers for work, repairs, &c., I have come back from the country almost penniless."

He thought this bucolic allusion would sound well, since he could not really explain what had emptied his purse at Deauville, the only country place he had been to. The friend who was coming to fetch him arrived just in time; he could hear his voice in the hall, and he hoped that fool of a Pierre would have the sense to show him in.

Sister Alexandrine saw what was coming, and as Robert du Plessis was carefully feeling in his waistcoat pocket for a sovereign, she went on—

"Monsieur, I may as well tell you what I really want. I do not ask you for a small gift, but for an important sacrifice which will do incalculable good. Monsieur, before to-night I want twenty pounds for

rent, otherwise four poor families will be turned out of doors. Decent people who only want work ; the old, the infirm, children ! They are genuine cases, I can assure you, and I know what I am saying. I have never seen such a state of things in all the forty years I have worked among the poor. We are quite unable to help them, as you know. Free people of means, living in the world, must take our place. They must lighten the weight of injustice that has overwhelmed us ; they must repair the harm done, if not by themselves, by those very near them. As good patriots and good Christians they must 'bear one another's burdens,' and relieve France of this debt."

She stopped, too agitated to proceed ; but Robert was calm.

"Twenty pounds ! impossible !"

It was true. He wished to pay back that very evening the eighty pounds obligingly lent by the very friend whose footsteps could still be heard in the hall. Sister Alexandrine made a last effort.

"This distress touches you more nearly than you can guess, Monsieur. There are some of your own class among these people. There is one young woman of twenty,

deserted by her husband and family, alone with a baby three months old, suffering all those privations which a man like you could feel for. Your mother would have helped her."

Yvonne's name nearly passed her lips; but no, she could not pronounce it here, where even the thought of love betrayed seemed exiled to make room for something lower still.

"Every one ought sometimes to make a sacrifice, if only in his own interest, to atone before God and man for some of those frailties from which we are none of us exempt. I am sure you have often been generous in a less deserving cause—will you refuse this, whatever it may cost you?"

"I assure you it is impossible," he said timidly, offering her a gold coin.

Sister Alexandrine appeared not to see it, as she rose. "I am sorry, Monsieur, if you only knew *how* sorry! You will regret it yourself some day." She stopped; it was not Robert's fault if he did not understand what she could not tell him. Still, in his presence, how could she forget that he was the cause of so much mis-

fortune, for which he ought to have been responsible.

Their eyes met ; without knowing why, he flushed as she quickly said good-bye. She crossed Robert's friend as she went out, and when the latter came in Robert was very agitated, and still standing.

"How extraordinary you look ! Who was that woman ?"

"A nun."

"Oh ! so nuns call on you now, do they ?"

Robert du Plessis hurried to the window. The courtyard was empty ; he ran to the bell.

"Pierre, is that lady gone ? Is she out of hearing ?"

"She is in the street, Monsieur."

"What is the matter, what has happened ?" repeated the friend.

"Nothing, only an idea of mine. It's just as well that that good soul has gone."

But he could not shake off his idea. Was he to feel like a remorseful criminal for the rest of his days ? Every time any one told him of a woman in distress, was he to imagine it was the one whose heart he had broken ? He had lately heard of

the sale of the Château de Virolles. It had been easy for him to obtain information about the owners without disclosing any special interest in them, and one of the innumerable lies which Yvonne's husband had circulated, came by chance to his ears. Monsieur Quantin de Virolles had a splendid opening in Canada, and had taken his wife there.

"She has grown attached to him, I suppose. At any rate she has forgotten me—I deserved it," repeated Robert to himself once more, with that incomprehensible bitterness which he could not dispel. His whole life bore traces of that one action. The woman for whom he had deserted Yvonne was forgotten, yet the memory of the forsaken girl persisted, the more he tried to obliterate it. Everything recalled her, and he had even been nearly caught by the regular beggar's trick of saying, "You will be sorry for this," when heart and purse refuse to open. Another arrow shot into the air!

CHAPTER X

THE RETURN

THE station cab rattled over the country road with a sound of jingling iron, and Sister Alexandrine leaned out of the window trying to distinguish, through the mist, clumps of trees and the vague outlines of scattered houses. Night set in. She settled herself in a corner of the vehicle, shut her eyes, and gave herself up to the sensation of absence from Paris, and the still stranger feeling of being at home again. She had never thought to come back. Even that morning the idea had not occurred to her; she would not have thought herself equal to the ordeal. She only thought of it as she left Du Plessis' house. After seeing so many doors shut against her, and with no chance of others being opened, she at last remembered the one house where she was sure of a welcome, and where any request of hers would be granted with joyful alacrity, as some acknowledgment for the magnificent gift accepted in the past.

It was on her alone that would fall the effort and sacrifice. Had she the right to spare herself when her poor had no other helper? Could she, like people in the world, dismiss as "impossible" all that was hard and painful to accomplish? The legal delay would expire next day. She had just time to get to Arcilly and back, and without giving herself time for further deliberation, she had taken the train which had brought her, in two hours, to this little station in the midst of the country round Chartres, where one might fancy oneself a hundred miles from Paris.

The Château was only half-an-hour's drive from the station, and the cab was getting near. The mist had turned to rain. Sister Alexandrine could no longer distinguish anything. But the very air she breathed was full of memories. She recognised it, though she had not breathed it for so many years. Her native air! Though she could see nothing along the dark road, her brain recalled the landscape, with its great meadows full of hay and the little path between two hedges; so icy in winter, but so gay with flowers in spring!

"It was spring when I went away, and there were lilacs and hawthorns everywhere." The cab turned into the avenue. "How surprised they will be to see me! I am a myth to them! I don't know them, nor even what the family consists of. Probably a young couple with children."

Sister Alexandrine felt a kind of discomfort stealing over her at each turn of the wheels. A gate opened. She drove past a lawn and a shrubbery, in the midst of which a white roof shone in the moonlight. "The dove-cot!" Again she leaned from the window. Lights began to appear, and she could recognise the house though it was still hidden.

There were the windows of the library, there those of the dining-room, and higher up was the turret. The basement was fully lighted. They had heard wheels; as the cab drew up under the porch, the electric light was switched on to the lamps which illumined the brick and stone front of the Château. A servant came out, looking cautiously at the cab, and the traveller who got out. The rain was falling in pailsful. Sister Alexandrine went in without a word. She stopped in the great hall—she dared

not walk over the well-remembered marble pavement in her heavy, muddy shoes. That was all she did remember. The stained-glass windows, the rugs, the bright coloured draperies, the modern cabinets full of knick-knacks, the tropical plants flourishing in a green-house atmosphere, in no way recalled the cold, solemn severity of the house as it had looked in her time. The glass partition, curtained with white silk, which replaced the drawing-room door, did not seem to insure sufficient family privacy. The anteroom was evidently intended for a kind of general meeting-place, with quaint-shaped chairs standing familiarly round the table.

All was convenient, even elegant, but perhaps rather vulgar. Had the spirit of the place altered too? In the last half-century the old house had twice changed hands, passing from the elder to the younger branch of the family; then from the last of that now extinct stock, to a nephew by marriage; who was only connected in the most distant way with the original owners. Sister Alexandrine had never had any dealings with him. It was only by the merest chance that she learned he had inherited

Arcilly, and till now the fact had not concerned her. The inheritance was in good hands, and that was enough. Now that more details would have been useful to her, she had neither had the time nor the opportunity to glean any. Even at the station she did not like to ask questions, for she had a childish shrinking from recognition.

But her anxiety was unnecessary. The man-servant certainly did not know her. He left her in the anteroom, and did not attempt to ask her to come any further. As he still stood waiting, she asked if Monsieur and Madame de Prielle were at home. He looked at her—

“Madame la Baronne has been dead two years.”

She could tell that the question gave a strange impression. “I should like to see Monsieur de Prielle.”

“He is not here.”

“When will he be home?”

“We don’t know, Madame. He has been travelling for a month.”

Sister Alexandrine had expected obstacles, but nothing so disastrous as this. Still, the house seemed inhabited.

"Are any of the family at home?"

"Yes, the young ladies."

"Could I speak to them?" She blundered on, showing at every word her ignorance of the habits of the house, and making him more and more suspicious.

"The young ladies are at their lessons."

They could only be little girls unable to interfere or help, and the visitor's face looked so weary and disappointed, that the servant was touched. If even she had only come to beg, it was a long way, and she was not young; there could be no harm in being civil.

"Would you like to speak to Madame Stern?" he suggested, thinking it unnecessary to speak in the third person.

"Who is Madame Stern?"

"The young ladies' governess."

Sister Alexandrine hesitated and shook her head. All her plans had failed. The master and mistress of the house were the only people who could have helped her. She would only arouse useless astonishment in the others. It was best to go away. She looked round once more. In the old days that seemed to have vanished so completely, hospitality had been simpler

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and more prompt. If any one, however unknown, had called, even to beg, the host himself would have come out of the library on the right, his favourite room. He would have said, "Come in," with the smile that always lit up his grave face under his white hair. Sister Alexandrine's youth had basked in that smile, and perhaps it was because she had admired his chivalrous nature so much, and had learned such high and pure things from him, that she found no one in the world to come up to his standard; and the heroic visions first dreamed of in that house ended on the battle-field of charity. But though she had sacrificed the money she had inherited from her dearly loved father, she was none the less his daughter; and his very smile was on the lips of the old nun as she gazed at the closed door. Suddenly it opened, and some one came straight up to Sister Alexandrine.

It was the governess, Madame Stern. She was a little, withered woman, who held her head up, and rustled her skirts so that they might take up as much room as possible. She made up in importance for her position as a paid inmate of the house.

"What is it? What do you want, Madame?"

She spoke with a strong foreign accent, and looked the new comer up and down with a haughty and suspicious air.

"I expected to find Monsieur de Prielle. I hear he is away."

"Can I not take his place?"

"No, thank you, Madame. It is a family matter."

"Oh, I am quite in the confidence of the family," explained Madame Stern, already offended. A little curiosity mingled with her rudeness. She had not lived for nothing in the heart of the country, without amusements or acquaintances, and she wanted to clear up the mystery of this visit, as well as to assert herself. "I am bound to look into everything, bringing up the children alone as I do, and taking the place of their poor mother, who was once my pupil too."

She had come with her pupil to the Château where Madame de Prielle had reigned by the accident of her marriage, and where her husband only lived because he happened to inherit it.

The past seemed more distant than ever.

It was possible to be in this family's "confidence," and yet to know nothing of the family which had preceded the De Prielles by two generations. It was known that the estate had been left by an uncle, and no one troubled to inquire from whom the uncle inherited it.

"Would you leave me your card, or your name?" asked Madame Stern. A name cannot be withheld.

"Sister Alexandrine."

The governess's grim face did not relax; the name meant nothing to her. She looked at the old black costume and bonnet as Robert du Plessis had done.

"My Order is dispersed. I have no longer the right to wear the religious habit," explained Sister Alexandrine gently.

"Oh, I understand. They have secularised the school here too, and we have opened a free school under nuns, whom Monsieur le Baron provides for."

The Baron's generosity would, of course, protect him from further demands. However, now the visitor had explained her identity, Madame Stern offered her one of the American arm-chairs, and sat down at the opposite side of the table. The dialogue continued.

"Have you no message for Monsieur le Baron?"

"No; where would a letter find him?"

The governess hesitated. She liked making difficulties, to show how important her position was. At last, "Monsieur le Baron is on a cruise with some friends," she said stiffly; "he will stop at Gibraltar next week."

Ten or twelve days before an answer could be expected, and the delay would expire to-morrow! Sister Alexandrine rose with a sigh.

"Is the business pressing?" asked Madame Stern. "Have you come far, and on purpose?"

"From Paris."

"I am sorry; I would willingly have helped you, but it would take time for me to refer first to Monsieur le Baron—I am very careful. Though I have full powers, I have made it a rule to do nothing on my own authority. If it is a question of money, the quickest way would be to communicate with Monsieur le Baron's lawyer at Chartres."

Sister Alexandrine decided that it was useless to prolong the interview. The tiring

journey, the almost superhuman effort, had resulted in her making the acquaintance of Madame Stern! Her poor sad heart made a final effort.

"Before going, I should have so liked to see the little girls."

"It is very late, I don't really know." Madame Stern tried again to get up a scruple. But she could not think of any risk her pupils would run by seeing an old woman for a few minutes in their governess's presence; so, with a bad grace, she agreed. "Well, please come in here, but don't interrupt their work too long. Children are so ready to idle."

"Oh, I understand children."

The library door opened. The soft light of reading-lamps filled the room. Nothing was altered here; the room which had been the most comfortable in the house, now looked the simplest. Wirework ran all round the walls protecting the books; on the top of the shelves were portfolios, and busts of eminent men. Old family portraits, more numerous than in the old days, covered the walls in all directions, their frames almost overlapping. They had been turned out of the drawing-rooms

—these forefathers of the old proprietors—to make way for the new family. The portraits had been kept out of respect for their age, but no one knew whom they represented nor felt any attachment to them.

As Sister Alexandrine entered, a bright flame leapt up the chimney, illuminating the pictured face of a fair-haired young girl, and three little blonde heads bent over the table. The flame died down. Sister Alexandrine neither saw, nor would see, anything but the little living heads.

“How hard we work,” she whispered.

Three faces looked up—pink cheeks, clear eyes, rosy lips—they were a pretty group of little girls, aged five, six, and eight, in all the bloom of childhood. Madame Stern did not speak. There was nothing attractive about the visitor. The children were rather shy from always living in the country, and were not sorry to be excused a greeting and kiss. The heads bent down again, and the cherub faces were hidden. All that the trembling visitor could caress were long, light curls, falling over the children's large white collars. Already the bitterness which such a visit might have created in her, began to melt into com-

passion, Had not these children been stricken before they had gone many steps on the way that looked so smooth? Were not the three little girls motherless? She prayed that the old house, so full of holy and noble traditions, might be a sure and certain refuge for them. Things were best as they were.

Sister Alexandrine turned to the family portraits in farewell, and commended the little ones to their care. Her eyes rested on each picture, but carelessly passed over the young girl with golden hair, in her dainty dress of the year 1869. She counted as one dead, quite as much as the others. Golden hair, youthful bloom, well-bred grace, had all been disdained like cast-off finery and useless impediments to the soul's flight. The only place the forgotten picture could fitly remain in was where the original herself felt a stranger.

Madame Stern watched Sister Alexandrine quite unconsciously, yet with a vague notion that she herself had somehow blundered. This perhaps suggested hospitable thoughts to her slow mind.

"You must be tired, Madame, after the

journey. Won't you rest and take some refreshment?"

"Thank you, but I have only time to get back to the station to catch the eight o'clock train. I particularly want to be back in Paris to-night."

"Then I must not press you. But I don't like your starting like this, in such dreadful weather."

Gusts of wind shook the windows of the cab and penetrated the ill-fitting doors, making large, wet patches on Sister Alexandrine's clothes. She had taken up her motionless position on the back seat. Why should she try and recognise the country? The tender sentiment of bygone years had evaporated. This return had wiped it out. The piously cherished vision of the past would always be blurred by that other memory, which she was taking with her to-night. She had relinquished the holy relics of memory, last treasure of those who have stripped themselves of all else; and had received nothing in return.

In the third-class compartment, where she was hurriedly pushed as the train started, this idea of supreme renunciation pursued her. She seemed to have lost her identity,

or never to have existed. She was an unknown ghost, vainly trying to reappear, and awaking neither fear, pity, nor even surprise. Not only was her old self dead, but "Sister Alexandrine, the nun," was fast disappearing too. She could not fight against Fate much longer. The world would never understand that a vocation could remain, after its functions were forbidden. Even as a nun, given up to the service of others, she had had certain prerogatives. Neither alms nor rebuffs had been addressed to her in her own person, and therefore could not degrade her. Now, in her loneliness, she was a mark for every arrow. Having always been humble, she had now to practise humiliation, to endure isolation, suspicion, and worse still, ridicule.

"I made myself ridiculous to-night, as I did this morning!" she reflected, going over her succession of ordeals, which made up only one long day. It was not even now at an end! As the train approached Paris, her disappointment overcame her, and tortured her afresh. "What would ridicule and all else matter if only I had succeeded!"

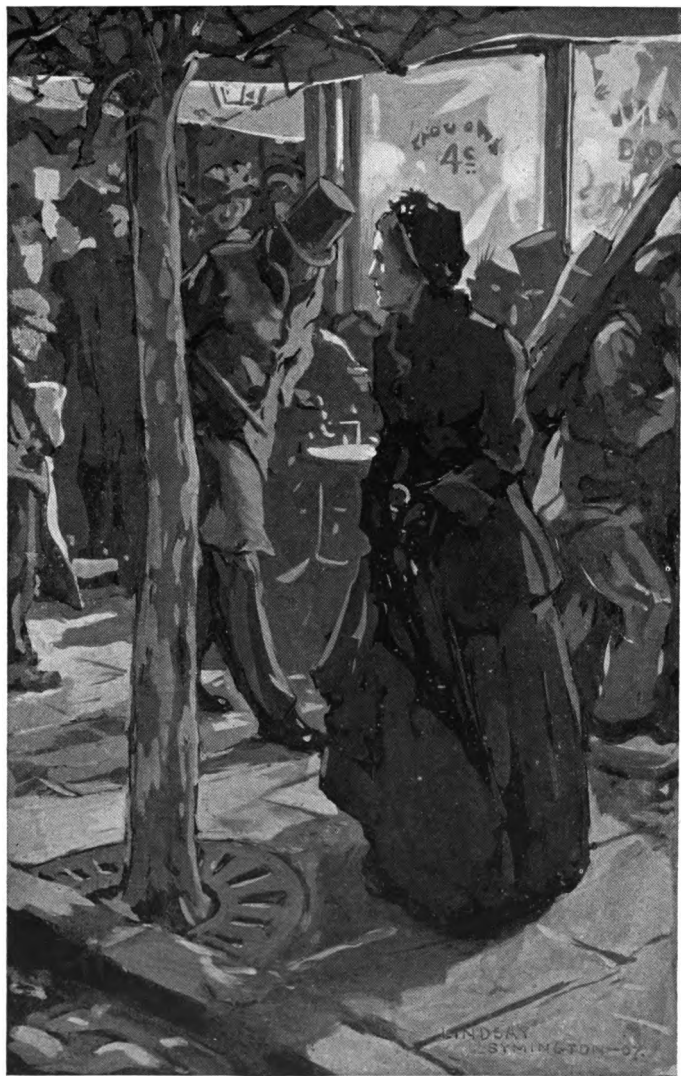
But her failure was complete, and hence-

forward irreparable. She had wasted the last hours of the legal delay—"Not to speak of what the journey has cost me," she sighed. "More than a pound thrown away!"

She did not stop to remember that that same journey, so sad to her to-day, had been taken thirty years ago by a young girl who, in one sublime impulse, was giving up all earthly affections, ambitions, and joys, leaving behind her a fortune generously relinquished to others, and a house where she had been supplanted. . . . What is done, is done. In the ordinary course of things the gift had passed from hand to hand, and time had brought forgetfulness. There was nothing strange or painful about this; but by a mere irony of fate, a stranger guarded the door of the old manor-house, refused to admit other strangers, hesitated to offer them the bread of hospitality, and it was a remnant of pride in Sister Alexandrine herself, that had made her refuse this much needed bread, made from her own wheat. She had made a scanty early breakfast, and had had no dinner at all. As she got out at St. Lazare, her head swam. But she would

not take a cab. She had wasted enough money to-day. The evening was turning out fine, but a damp mist clung to the street lamps and dimmed the glass of the shop windows. It seemed darker than usual on the wet pavement and the muddy roads. People hurried along, and Sister Alexandrine tried to imitate them. She could only go slowly, for she was out of breath. Several times she had to stop and gasp, and when she had passed the Rue Auber, and was waiting at the Place de l'Opéra to cross over, she was too giddy to venture into the road among the ceaseless stream of vehicles, and she waited on the pavement till others were going over.

Just then some people came out of a café. Suddenly her faintness went off. Her brave, devoted nature, always pre-occupied with others, supported her. An unexpected, perhaps unique opportunity for a charitable effort had presented itself. Sister Alexandrine had recognised the man who was passing her, with head held low, and coat collar turned up over one of those faces impossible to forget. She anxiously asked herself if it would not be madness



"Sister Alexandrine had recognised the man, with his head held low."

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to let him get away when once he was found. She joined him. He either did not see or recognise her, so she deliberately accosted him.

"Monsieur Quantin!"

He stopped. His friends fell back.

"What is it? Who are you?" he asked, his eyes looking heavier than ever in his livid face.

For the third time that day she answered, "I am Sister Alexandrine."

Yvonne's husband was taken by surprise and obliged to listen.

"Monsieur Quantin, I must seem indiscreet to you, but my work obliges me to be so. One cannot help others without getting to know a little of their lives. You can't be angry with me for speaking of what *must* interest you, even in spite of yourself. I am sure you will be glad to hear news of your wife and child."

Monsieur Quantin looked confused and taken aback. His only answer was to fly into a sudden rage, as people do when they cannot justify themselves.

"I don't want to hear anything about them," he said, setting his teeth. "All is over between my wife and me. I owe no

account of my actions to any one. You have no right to question me."

"Yes I have—I have the right you yourself gave me, when you deserted a sick woman and a new-born child, leaving me to take care of them, and shifting your own responsibilities on to my shoulders. You allowed me to interfere then. You ought to allow it now, especially as I am acting in your interest more than in theirs."

Monsieur Quantin had no answer ready: "Why did I go? As you say, in the interest of others." This gross, unmeaning lie was all the tired brain could invent. In the last few months, relieved of even the slight check of Yvonne's presence, Monsieur Quantin had made alarming downward progress. He was now a physical and mental wreck, and it was only a woman like Sister Alexandrine who would have stooped to argue with him. She even took the trouble to go into details.

"How was it the interest of your wife and child to be abandoned?"

"Don't you understand that I simply threw them on the pity of the world?"

"Why should others pity them, when you, the husband and father, did not?"

"I—I am proud—it is difficult to explain. There are many things to be cleared up between my wife and me!"

"What things, pray?" The Sister looked at him indignantly.

He changed his tone. He could not calumniate his wife to this holy woman. "I say no harm of Madame Quantin—I do not accuse her."

"Then why do you imply that she is in the wrong, by forsaking her? Why don't you come back when she has always forgiven you, and would again? She has everything to attract you, beauty as well as goodness."

"I don't say she hasn't," he said carelessly.

"And your little girl! If you saw her! She is in good health now; and so pretty—she has bright eyes, and she smiles already. In a few months she will walk and talk, and hold out her arms to you. Will you deprive yourself of so much happiness?"

Monsieur Quantin's face remained stolid, and he turned away with the unmistakable intention of putting an end to the conversation and joining his friends.

"Do think of what I have told you," re-

peated Sister Alexandrine. "Won't you give me your address?" He shook his head. "Take mine; one of these days you will have a good impulse. You will come and see me, and all can be quickly arranged. I promise you."

He took the address mechanically. Then his irritation got the better of him.

"You are no longer in your Convent," he sneered, as a farewell shot. "You aren't a nun now—why don't you stop preaching?"

"He will never come back; he paid no attention to me; and he himself told me the reason," she said to herself.

Because she was no longer in her Convent, she had lost the right to speak the "word in season"; she was no longer respected, much less obeyed. A beneficent influence had left the world when the white cornettes and collars went. With the crash of all the tradition of holiness represented by a religious Order, a powerful instrument for morality was crushed, which no individual sacrifice could replace. Sister Alexandrine felt this downfall to its very depth.

"I have not been able to do anything," she said, when at last she got home, to Sister Cécile, who was terrified at the long delay ;

"I have brought nothing back for those poor creatures. It is too late to tell them to-night. I will go to-morrow."

Great tears filled her eyes at the prospect. Little Sister Cécile turned pale, and bent down to kiss the elder woman. It hurt her to see any one cry. She dreaded tears; they recalled Sister Stéphanie and the weeping which hastened her death.

CHAPTER XI

THE EXECUTION

THE bailiff and his men were going upstairs; Madame Cottard listened to their footsteps from below. She had sent for them—she had greeted them with the same confidential wink as the police who came before. These men were also instruments of an arbitrary power, the only difference being that they were not solely employed by Government: they could be set to do the dirty work of any private individual who chose to call them in. At the reflection that she could set in motion an important factor for evil, Madame Cottard tasted the subtle joys of the true demagogue; she had joined the ranks of “tyrants.” This secret triumph was needed to compensate her for her bitter disappointment. Hitherto her rents had always been paid, however much delay, recrimination, and difficulty had been made over them. At the end of each year she banked the eight or ten per cent., which represented the rotten old house,

bought years ago for a mere song, and costing her nothing since in repairs.

This year Madame Cottard would be out of pocket. The furniture of her beggarly lodgers would barely cover her expenses. She had to be satisfied with a moral reward. Madame Cottard was avenged at last—for what? For the troubles of others. And, hidden in a dark corner of the staircase, she followed with delight the words and deeds of her champions.

They were at Madame Henry's; they began there so as to get into fighting order. It would be worse at the Bréchets; Madame Cottard listened in vain. Nothing could be heard outside. The women were probably crying and lamenting with their door shut. Ah! it opens at last! Cries are heard. Then a hurried flight of light feet down the stairs, like a dog or cat slipping over steps. Madame Henry's mother, with her cap on one side, her grey hair flying, her little old face bathed in tears, passed the landlady without seeing her, and rushed into the ground-floor room.

"Madame Cottard, Madame Cottard!" she called, stammering and trembling.

She might well call, and look too. She

rushed wildly out into the courtyard, still searching, questioning every one, and her pride so thoroughly broken at last that she did not mind who saw her. They were being turned out. Her poor daughter was in the midst of an attack—she would die of it, she knew she would! Madame Cottard couldn't want that! People may be grasping over money, without being murderesses! Where was Madame Cottard, couldn't she find her and beg her to have pity?

"It was cute of me to disappear," thought the landlady, laughing to herself in her hiding-place. Her only fear was that she would be found. As soon as Madame Henry had rushed upstairs again like a whirlwind, to make sure her poor daughter was still alive, the landlady went into her own room, and this time barricaded the door. Every one was against her, and things would be getting hot. The Bréchets would not allow themselves to be turned out without a struggle. There would be a d—l of a row. She had a qualm as she thought of the strapping girl Régine, with her flaming eyes and closed fists, and she shot the bolt, only going from the window to the keyhole to watch what was going on.

The bailiff had finished with the Henrys. The inventory had been taken, and the poor wretches were probably putting together what the law allowed them to keep ; that is, their beds and a few eatables, not even a change of clothes. They were decent people and would not retain anything illegally ; Madame Cottard did them that justice, and was not anxious.

She saw Monsieur Legrand go out, his face perfectly convulsed, and walking like a man who can barely contain himself. Was the accountant going to turn round and take the part of the defaulters ? If he was much longer out of work, he would find himself in the same boat, and he had better be careful how he behaved, or his own turn might come. Suddenly in the comparative silence, a tremendous tumult arose, filling the entire house.

The washerwomen from below all ran out, and even Madame Quantin, in her alarm, appeared on the landing. The landlady was the only one who did not start ; she was expecting it. They were evicting the Bréchets, that was all. Poor Régine, in spite of repeated warnings, had been taken unawares.

Since her babyhood, spent in receiving blows from her parents and fighting with other little gutter-birds, insults, reproaches, and mutual threats had formed the whole of her intercourse with her fellow-creatures. Stray thumps, the baker refusing credit, children crying with hunger or cold—these were the black landmarks in her miserable life. But hitherto she had been, so to speak, too low down in the scale to dread catastrophes. Born amongst ruins, she did not know the agony of seeing a home crumble round her. She was accustomed to days of ordinary poverty, alternating with absolute want. But there was no hope now. If she was turned out to-night with the little ones, where was she to go? What was she to do with them and the old drunkard? How could she earn enough to keep them when they hadn't a room to live in or a chair to sit on? Death was preferable.

Dishevelled and yelling, she had thrown herself in front of the men who represented her executioners, insulting them, and calling them by every vile name that she had picked up in the streets for the last eighteen years. Then, as they were accustomed to such language and were not the least dis-

turbed, she seized the chair on which she had sat sewing for so many patient hours, and dashed it across the room. Then, her blood being up, she turned to with a will, and began to throw the furniture about, shouting and stamping like a fury, surrounded by the howling children, and supported by resounding oaths from old Bréchet, who was on the brink of an attack of *delirium tremens*. The neighbours had rushed up, and were trying to make them hear reason. She struggled all the harder in the arms of those who held her back. She tried to scratch the men's eyes out, and spat in their faces. The bystanders vainly tried to make her see that this was of no avail.

"What do I care? They can stick us all in prison if they choose; it would be the best thing that could happen to us!"

The bailiff, quite unmoved, continued to open cupboards. But the pawnshop had emptied them before him. Countless rags, broken or cracked kitchen utensils, the wardrobe, and the white deal table, were all the visible assets. As for the beds, they were not allowed to be touched.

"But there are a good many mattresses," observed the accurate Government official.

Régine leapt up again. "Too many; and we are eight! If we have mattresses, we didn't even buy them. The Sisters gave them to us when they were turned out, as we are being turned out now. If they had been left in peace, we shouldn't have come to this! But there's no such thing as justice now. Government, police, judges, bailiffs—they're all a lot of beasts, banded together against working people."

This only made matters worse.

"The Sisters paid our rent when we hadn't the money. Sister Alexandrine used to attend to Madeleine."

Fortunately she broke down here, and was got out of the room. Old Bréchet had already let himself be led staggering away. The bailiff stayed behind to lock the door. Their lodgings were shut up; the eviction was over.

When Régine realised what had happened, she rushed to the door like a lioness, shook it, tried to force it in, and while every one was trying to calm this fresh outburst, when even Madame Quantin had come down with her baby, pouring out soothing words, the girl grew suddenly calm. She threw back the long fair locks that fell over her

drawn face, arranged her sham tortoise-shell combs, and said in a low voice, hoarse from shouting—

“Come, let’s get out of this.”

She went first, forgetting even to lead Madeleine, who was stumbling on her weak legs. Madame Legrand, singularly compassionate since her own troubles, lifted the child up. The packers supported old Bréchet, who was half paralysed from sciatica. The other children followed, sulky and dumb, yet surprised at the amount of attention they were receiving. When the miserable tribe were in the courtyard, even the most compassionate shrank back. They looked like a brood of owls torn from their nest, exposing their mournful ugliness to the light of day. Those who had generously thought of sheltering them, changed their minds. Besides, eight people were too many!

Régine understood the significant silence around them. She tittered nervously, still mechanically tidying her edifice of rough hair. She pointed to her father, who had sunk down groaning on a packing-case, in the middle of the courtyard, with his six children round him.

"What's to be done with that lot, eh? And cold weather coming, ugh! it's winter already!" and she shivered in her thin red cotton bodice. She looked a tragic figure as she crossed the paved court, under a lowering sky; behind her the grey walls, the old fountain with its lichen-covered basin, and the crazy old lodging-house.

With her golden hair and red bodice, latent fire still smouldering in her eyes, she caused a new sensation among the men who were already touched by the recent scene. Perhaps she herself realised that a sudden change in her life was impending. It might be for the worse, but it would be no longer "always the same old story," as she used to say to Sister Alexandrine.

"Old Cottard has taken the tip, and has made off before I could tell her what I think of her before them all. Never mind, old girl! You'll see me again yet," she muttered.

But before she could come back, she must go.

The bailiff had come down without going into any of the other rooms; he had put off the rest of his jobs, and merely wanted to finish what he had begun to-day. They had to hurry out of the court, or the police would

come. Old Bréchet got up. But another tragedy was taking place before the last was over.

An ambulance had stopped before the door. Hospital porters got out and went upstairs.

“Who is it for?”

The men came down carrying Madame Henry, white as death, and nearly unconscious. Whilst all the shouting and abuse went on downstairs, a lodger had been quietly dying overhead in the same resigned, quiet way as she had lived, without disturbing any one.

Monsieur Legrand had just been for the doctor, who had immediately sent the sick woman into a hospital.

“My poor daughter,” sobbed the old mother, as she helplessly followed the procession; “she did so hope to die at home.” Her child, her invalid, lovingly nursed for so many years, did not even belong to her now; the parish had taken possession of her by right. She tried to get into the ambulance. The men pushed her back. She was not eligible for the hospital; next Thursday she could come and see her daughter. Then she tried to walk after the white van with its

little red cross flag, but in two or three minutes her old legs failed her.

She ran back into the house and up to the fourth floor like a mad woman, went into her room for the last time, and struggled up on to Madame Henry's arm-chair to get down the only precious object left them by the law—"the dear departed's" picture. She got it out under her arm.

Yvonne Quantin, who had also been expecting the fatal visitors, called after her, but the old woman did not turn her head. She shuffled downstairs, dragging along the frame that was almost as big as herself, and only stopped when she was outside the house, and in the street. She put the frame on the ground and stood still, with no idea of what to do next, or what would become of her, till she felt a hand on her shoulder.

All the afternoon Sister Alexandrine had been miserably prowling round the neighbourhood, afraid to show herself lest the sight of her should harden Madame Cottard's heart still more. She had just met the Bréchets coming out, and had asked if she could do anything to help Régine;

but the girl who was growing more and more desperate, had refused all assistance. The poor forsaken old woman remained to her. Without a word she helped her carry the frame, and they walked away.

As Sister Alexandrine was going towards her own lodging, Madame Henry's mother demurred. She had a brother at Bercy who would take her in, and the "dear departed" would be in safety there. She only wanted to be helped into the tram-car. Perhaps she was right. Now that "La Providence" no longer existed to offer a permanent refuge to the poor, with assured means of providing for them, it was better for their own sakes to let them shift for themselves. And yet . . .

CHAPTER XII

CHARITAS

SISTER ALEXANDRINE had not yet recovered from her journey; its effects were plainly visible. It might have been from cold, fatigue, or emotion, but at any rate she had brought back a malignant microbe from Arcilly, which was slowly working in her, sometimes affecting one organ, sometimes another.

"What you want is change of air," repeated Sister Cécile with gentle pertinacity.

Perhaps Sister Cécile unconsciously felt the same want herself. The life she had led since they left "La Providence" did not suit the country-bred girl. She could not get accustomed to being shut up all day in a more or less unhealthy old house, deprived of all interest in life, and working at her needle with no physical or mental exercise. She never complained, but she was growing thinner, and her fresh complexion began to look like ivory.

"I daresay. We will try and spend a few days in the country in the spring," answered Sister Alexandrine.

The Norman girl's blue eyes grew bright, as if they reflected the sky.

"Why should I not give the poor child the joy of seeing her native place, since she is still able to love it," sadly reflected Sister Alexandrine. "Of what use am I here?"

The eviction of her poor had wounded her to the heart. Though she always felt tired now, she managed to go and see the Bréchets, who had got into a hovel in the St. Antoine quarter, the resort of nameless wretches, where the degradation of the children's souls and bodies would be complete.

Madame Henry's mother, living with her brother, and ill-treated by her sister-in-law, grew slovenly in her habits and coarse in her speech; she just preserved energy enough to drag herself to the hospital on Thursdays, where she looked on at her daughter slowly dying, and the daughter watched her mother becoming senile. After each interview, the two miserable women had seen enough of each other to cry over till the next visit.

Monsieur Legrand, unable to get a place as accountant, had resigned himself to the

lowest place in a small shop. He went out every morning, hanging his head, and came back more disheartened every night; and the silver spoons which Madame Legrand was so proud of giving her visitors on Sundays at tea, had disappeared from their case.

Yvonne continued to defend herself and her baby against destitution, with all the energy of despair. Having managed to get some painting and writing to do, she worked ten or twelve hours a day, and even longer, taking care of her child and cleaning her room. But she could not remain long at such a pitch. Her strength would give way suddenly, and then what was to become of her and her little Jeanne?

"And I am powerless to help her!" said Sister Alexandrine to herself, at last bereft of all her brave confidence in the future. However she tried to hide it, her poor people guessed that she was discouraged, and now that they could no longer cling to her as a certain source of help, by an instinct of human selfishness and treachery they withdrew from her. She still had her sick, she could still offer the alms of night watching, of difficult and repulsive

nursing, but it was bitter to hear the one refrain, "Oh, if the 'Providence' were still open," at every sick bed, when everything was wanting, and it was no longer possible to go to the convent stores for sheets, warm blankets, remedies, food, and little dainties.

Other charitable institutions existed, but they all suffered; there were always more poor than could be looked after, without adding to their number. In the beginning private charity had undertaken, in all good faith, to provide substitutes for the work of the Congregations. The substitutes felt the weight of the burden when it was transferred to their shoulders. People wondered how the nuns had possibly borne it, and admitted themselves incapable of imitating them. In the direction of free schools alone, they were met by almost insurmountable obstacles, and even then had to have recourse to secularised nuns.

"You have your certificates; you ought to do what is being asked of so many of us—go and teach in a school," Sister Alexandrine said one day to her little companion. The latter blushed. She had

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thought of it; what joy to follow her vocation under one form or another, and at the same time obey her hereditary instincts, and live in a village, peacefully teaching young children! Still she answered with her decided manner—

“I shall never leave you.”

“Suppose I go with you?”

“Oh, then I am quite ready.”

Sister Alexandrine made a note of this consent. Now, if necessary, she would leave Paris. Sister Cécile was young, still able to work, and to do good. She felt more and more convinced that her own working days were over. Towards the end of November, however, she had a surprise.

One day, as she was slowly walking up the Boulevard St. Germain, a smartly dressed, highly-scented young woman stopped in front of her.

“Sister, don't you know me?”

The affected face surrounded by an aureole of mimosa-coloured hair, above a large fur collar, recalled something to Sister Alexandrine, but so vaguely that she was obliged to answer—

“I beg your pardon, but I do not quite recognise you.”

"Of course I have changed in three years." The young woman was evidently delighted with the transformation. Then she answered the riddle: "Don't you remember Mathilde?"

"My child, can it really be you?" Sister Alexandrine took both her hands. Yes, now she remembered the smiling, impudent face, which used to be so pale and sad. Sister Alexandrine had watched it with so much tenderness in a work-girls' garret in the Rue de l'Echaudé St. Germain, when every one thought poor Mathilde was dying.

The girl's determined effort to live had helped her, and she pulled through; a kind soul had furthered her recovery by sending her to Nice, to a branch shop of Bockay's, the great dressmaking firm. Since then Sister Alexandrine had heard no more of her, and she might have felt frightened at Mathilde's unexpected prosperity. But the girl was virtuous and hard-working; her firm principles had carried her safely through Paris work-rooms, and her way of accosting her former benefactress was the best answer to any suspicion. After enjoying the

nun's surprise a little longer, she said, in her good-natured vulgarity—

“I had a stroke of luck; I am Madame Bockay now!”

She told her romantic story quite simply. The head of the business, a widower, made love to her, and, finding her deaf to other overtures, had proposed marriage. Well, she took him at his word, and during the two years they had been married they had got on better and better, and business had prospered more and more. She spent part of every winter now in Paris, lived in a four-hundred-guinea flat over their shop in the Rue du Quatre Septembre, went to the Bois, dressed in the latest style, dyed her hair, and tried to be in the height of fashion to please her dressmaker husband, and to advertise the business. But her head was not turned; she was still the same practical, open-hearted girl as ever.

“I have often thought of you,” she said prettily, “and your nursing—but for that I might not be alive now. That is how I came to recognise you, though you, too, are altered.” Her early training had not taught her to make graceful transitions.

"If ever I could be useful to you in return."

"You could perhaps. I have still people to help."

"I ought to know it. I used to be one of them."

Already Sister Alexandrine had thought of a way of making her useful. Mathilde reminded her of another woman, as unlucky as she had been the reverse, who urgently needed a helping hand.

"You have a large dressmaking establishment. Would you give some work to a poor girl, the eldest of seven children?"

Madame Bockay had a clear head. In a few words she had mastered the situation.

"Send your girl to me to-morrow at eight o'clock—you see I still keep early hours. I will see what can be done for her. In any case I promise to employ her. When one is happy oneself, one must do a good turn to others."

With these kind words she said good-bye. She had tried to say something else, but even her assurance failed. As she watched the nun, in her worn dress, walking away with tired steps, she regretted her discretion and ran after her.

"Sister, you were turned out of your Convent, and harshly treated—if ever you are in difficulties yourself, remember I know what poverty is, and you helped me once—don't be proud."

Sister Alexandrine started slightly. "Thank you, dear child. I do not want anything for myself."

Madame Bockay went away, leaving a trail of scent behind her, and swinging a little gold-chain purse that looked well filled. A few halfpence still rattled in Sister Alexandrine's pocket. Well, that would suffice for the present. It was enough to pay for an omnibus to take her to Régine with the good news. Courage and hope can never come too quickly to a poor man's door.

But the Bréchets' garret presented an unexpected spectacle to Sister Alexandrine. The father was warming soup. One of the little boys held Madeleine on his knee, and was trying to stop her crying. Little Louis sat on the floor, languidly playing with the old box of cotton, needles, and scissors belonging to his big sister, which she had so often put out of his reach. There was a fresh gap, an unusual scene of confusion amongst them.

“Where is Régine?”

Old Bréchet looked up with a besotted expression: “Well, you won’t see *her*! She’s had enough of it. She’s left us in the lurch, without saying by’r leave. She ran away the day before yesterday—and I don’t even know——”

Sister Alexandrine stood dumb-founded before this terrible evolution of evil—injustice, poverty, and disaster breeding one another. Because the nuns had been expelled and plundered, the poor in their turn had been robbed and turned into the streets. Now the powerful machinery of charity no longer moved under the hands of untiring workers; the poor lost heart and patience, and went to the bad. Of what use was help, if, like to-day, it came too late? It was the final blow to Sister Alexandrine’s hopes; and next week when one of the parish priests handed her a letter from a friend, a poor country priest in the Limousin district, asking for a free teacher for his village school, she hesitated no longer.

“Monsieur l’Abbé, it will just suit Sister Cécile. My child, you must accept. Twenty-four pounds a year, no rent to pay, a

mountain district, two hours and a half from the station! No lay teacher would take it, and still the poor children of the place must be brought up as Christians."

"But the school will be opened before the end of the year. They want an answer at once, and we should have to start directly. Can we be ready?"

Sister Alexandrine understood what was implied by "we," and no longer shrank from the step.

"We will be ready."

Still her mind was not quite made up. During the few days of negotiation, she struggled against a vague interior resistance, which she could neither reason with nor overcome. Sometimes she thought it a form of selfishness, at others she feared it might be a mistaken sense of duty, or the struggle between Divine wisdom and her own will. As she had always seen her path plainly before her, she was surprised at her own indecision. In the morning, at Mass, she prayed at great length that God would give her light, and came back in the course of the day to renew her prayer. Still all seemed dark. All who interfered to advise, encourage, or dis-

courage her, only added to her confusion of mind.

At the first hint of her departure, Yvonne Quantin, taken by surprise, gave way to a fit of despair. "You are going away? You are going to leave me! I am forsaken enough already, what shall I have left?"

"But I am of so little use!"

"You?" The young woman put her head on her old friend's shoulder with her touching, child-like look, and told her what is rarely said in daily intimacy, but cannot be withheld in moments of real sorrow. "As you are going away, you shall not go without knowing what you have been to me. You came to me when I was in the depths of despair; when I never dreamed of appealing to any one, because no one could help me, and you alone could have done what you did because you are 'not of this world.' A Pariah from Society, a woman exposed to every insult, I knew no shame before you. You did not look at things as the world does. You do not look upon suffering in any form as degrading; on the contrary it attracts you; you love it! And those who

suffer, long, above all things, to be loved by those who try to console them! Help without love is no consolation, but only another form of pain. You loved me so that you put yourself in my place; you became young again yourself, and saw with my eyes so that you might understand and judge me leniently. You know more of me than I have even told you myself. You know that the worst part of my troubles is not my poverty, nor even my outward circumstances, and you have soothed that grief with all my other woes. Perhaps I have suffered too much, and I am very young. Much as I adore my child, still my heart feels a want. I look back to the past, in spite of myself, and your affection is all that keeps me in check. I need an example to encourage me, and to show me how weak and cowardly I am. I say to myself, 'Sister was young once, and she had as loving a nature as I have. She raised that love, which some make their happiness and others their excuse, into something sacred; she used it as charity, for true charity and love are one.' That is why there is so little of it in the world: nearly all people

keep their love for themselves, or for their lovers and relations—few will put it into the common store and offer it to the service of all.”

“My dear little girl, that is the best way to invest love; it brings in the biggest interest. See how you have repaid me!” Sister Alexandrine had taken little Jeanne on her lap, and was rocking her like a loving old grandmother. “Don’t you think that I have my dark hours too? Well, the idea of parting from you is so hard, that even though my duty calls me away, I can’t reconcile myself to going. Am I not silly? I would like to carry you both off with me. Living is cheap there, but there is no work to be had. That is why it is better for you to stay here, where you can find employment, and where you have a chance of being recommended and helped. After all it is your duty to stay here whilst there is the slightest chance of your husband coming back.”

“What, do you think he will?” The young wife’s voice was full of unconquerable repugnance and alarm.

“I don’t know—at any rate, he is your husband. You spoke just now of charity.

Well, if you can no longer love him, try to feel in charity with him, if only because he is the father of your child. You must promise me that before I go away." Sister Alexandrine was not thinking only of pardon for the guilty. She felt that such a promise would protect Yvonne herself. So long as married life remained a future possibility, her feelings as a virtuous wife would keep off all dangerous day-dreams and memories. Yvonne felt this, and hesitated. "I won't go unless you do," said the nun firmly.

"I only want you to stay."

The nun hurriedly replaced little Jeanne in her cradle and went to the window; she opened it to breathe the fresh air. When she came back Yvonne noticed how changed she was, and wondered that she had not seen it some time ago. People were accustomed to be nursed and looked after by Sister Alexandrine, and they forgot that she herself was getting old and worn out, broken down in the service of others, and feeling the strain of the hard Paris life which was already tiring out Yvonne. She needed rest, and that before it was too late.

"But what I want," pursued Yvonne, "is to repay you a little for all you have done for me. You want my promise, well, I suppose you are right. I promise. You can go in peace. When do you start?"

"Sister Cécile has to be there on Friday. We shall leave Thursday by an evening train."

Thursday came. Sister Alexandrine went about in the same strange state of indecision, but she made her slight preparations like Sister Cécile, said good-bye to her old companions, and offered up a prayer in the cemetery where the Sisters of the Providence, among them Sister Stéphanie, were buried. She had hoped to get an inspiration at the grave, but nothing dispelled her darkness; she only felt the added sorrow of remembering that she would not herself lie here one day, that the Community was dissolved, and that she and her Sisters were parted even in death. With her head bowed she walked back through cheerful groups of people. It was between Christmas and New Year, the bright cold weather facilitated traffic, and added to the general mirth.

"My poor Paris, my dear Paris!"

thought Sister Alexandrine. Her legs were so heavy that it seemed as if her feet clung to the paving-stones. She had never known anything of the gaiety and luxury of Paris, but she had freely given the city her all, and that was what attracted her to it.

She reached home, and a cab came for the box. "Poor Paris, dear Paris!" repeated the old nun to herself, still watching the dingy houses and the dark road starred with lamps.

Little Sister Cécile was silent from natural delicacy, but she did not understand her comrade's reluctance to leave the city. If she had not controlled herself, she would have been quite gay; she felt so happy at going away to take up her old work again!

As they were preparing to get into the cab, a man passed who frightened her. He looked very mysterious and peculiar. He slipped unnoticed between the two women, and said, "Sister Alexandrine?"

Sister Alexandrine turned round. She was more experienced than her young companion, and was not afraid. She motioned to Sister Cécile to get into the cab, and

walked a few steps away with the man who spoke to her in a low voice.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed.

"Be quick, he wants you directly."

"But it is Madame Quantin you ought to fetch."

"No, he won't let his wife be sent for."

They exchanged a few more words.

"We shall miss the train," said Sister Cécile anxiously

Sister Alexandrine came back and opened the cab door: "My poor girl, you will be very disappointed. It is impossible for me to leave this evening. But that is no reason for you to break your appointment. Accept the sacrifice of starting alone. It is the will of God. He sends you away to your duty, and imposes mine on me here."

Sister Alexandrine closed the door. The gentle face of her favourite child, her only joy and comfort, disappeared, and she felt it was for ever. All that was human in her, shivered at the wrench. But the higher regions of her soul were full of an infinite peace. The ordeal of choice was over, and all was made plain. The Divine light had returned. God had shown her what He

expected of her, by one of those mysterious intimations which so plainly prove the intervention of Providence.

The wretched, ruined man, undermined and floored by his first attack of illness, sunk to such a depth of degradation that he dared not send for his own wife, had remembered the old nun, and that she could help him. His dying instinct was to ask for her. She had the rights and privileges of a mother, with a mother's blind devotion. She alone would not treat him as an outcast; she alone could and would help him to die.

The night that took her beloved daughter so far away, was passed by Sister Alexandrine beside the bed of the prodigal son, who needed her more sorely still, for he was travelling towards Eternity. She did not regret her sacrifice, nor dream of measuring its extent. Nothing repelled, nothing shocked her. Such peace had never before illumined her soul; and at last that peace spread to the soul which was struggling in its last agony. Those whom Sister Alexandrine succoured were never hopelessly unhappy; whatever their life had been, their end was hope.

Yvonne had terrible nightmares all night. Her farewells to Sister Alexandrine the day before had certainly upset her nerves. She fancied that her only safety lay in flying from an unknown approaching danger, and little Jeanne seemed affected by her mother's mood; she cried and tossed about incessantly. It was still early when Sister Alexandrine came in without knocking.

"What, haven't you started, Sister?"

"No, my dear child, I was prevented." For the first time Sister Alexandrine did not smile, and Madame Quantin immediately guessed that something terrible had happened. Gently and cautiously Sister Alexandrine told her what could not be concealed from her any longer, and the young woman, in her generosity of heart, shed sincere tears for the man whose faults were all wiped out: he was now only the father of her child, and she wept afresh to think that she had not been there to succour and forgive him.

"He was not forsaken; he knew you forgave him, and the greatest of all graces was vouchsafed to him," said Sister Alexandrine. "He was reconciled to God."

Sister Alexandrine had exhausted the

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remnant of her strength in her interview with the young widow. She went back to her lonely room; her little companion was no longer there to welcome her—she had given up that friendship, with all else, to charity, to the poor, to little children who must be trained in the love of God. She sat down in front of the cold hearth. The visions of last night haunted her. She shivered.

“I think,” she murmured, “my task is over!”

As soon as Sister Cécile had arrived in the Limousin district, she had written to describe her journey and her first impressions, pressing for a speedy reunion. The village, though pleasant, was a mere hamlet; nothing could now be seen but snow, but it was evidently very pretty in summer. The school-house would be very convenient when it was rebuilt; people would be kinder and more helpful when they knew her better; and she would find out the children's capacities. In fact the little nun was quite satisfied, and only wanted Sister Alexandrine to complete her happiness.

“But it is not worth while for me to go that distance,” Sister Alexandrine calmly

decided. "I am already at an age which none of my relations have reached."

Since her journey to Arcilly, she thought of her family in a different way, though not more often than in the past. They seemed nearer, and as if she would soon join them. She still went out and visited her poor people. If she had once stopped, it would have been for ever.

"You look very ill," people would say to her. Sister Lawrence came to see her, and evidently was shocked at her looks, for she suddenly suggested coming to live with her. Sister Alexandrine gladly consented. Sometimes she felt frightened at her loneliness. It was settled that Sister Lawrence should come next day.

"I shall be very glad to have her," said Sister Alexandrine to herself that night, when she came in from a visit undertaken in the snow to some one as ill as herself. "I wish to-morrow were here." She looked at Sister Cécile's bed next to hers; it was sometimes a cruel reminder of the absent. To enliven her waiting, she read over again a letter she had received. It had made a long round, and had been readdressed many times before reaching

her. It came from Monsieur de Prielle. Informed of her visit, after some delay, by Madame Stern, he had searched his memory, and guessed the name of the visitor. Indeed he had made too much of her name, for the fact of its being written in full on the envelope had delayed the letter. No one had known the nun under that name for forty years.

"The letter will be wanted one of these days," said Sister Alexandrine; "I must put it where it can be found." She left it in the drawer of her table, and reflected on the kind and delicate things Monsieur de Prielle had written. His offers were made with the discreet generosity and perfect tact of a gentleman and a man of good heart.

"I might ask him to help Yvonne and her child. But he is still young and a widower; he cannot look after a young woman. Poor girl, she wants a real protector. Who knows? Perhaps she may be happy again some day, but shall I be there to see? No, I shall be gone. Who will help her then to pick up the threads of her existence?"

Her shivering fit came back, and she

was forced to get into bed; she grew colder and colder, and felt thoroughly ill. Her body seemed numb and yet painful, but by a curious contrast her mind had never been so active. Many vexed problems were suddenly solved.

"Robert du Plessis must marry her. He owes her that reparation for all her sorrows. He is weak and irresolute. I am sure he repents; he would atone if he knew it was his duty and a possibility, but some one must tell him so—I will. No, I sha'n't have time to see him. I will write."

In her fever she wanted to write a letter to him at once, and another to Monsieur de Prielle, asking him to help some charitable Institutions. She tried to stretch out her arm to light a candle, but it was powerless. Her body had suddenly become inert—heavy and icy as a lump of lead. Her throat and tongue refused to serve her when she tried to call. She had been at too many sick beds to mistake her symptoms.

Her brain and her heart still survived, and the past unrolled itself before her eyes. Instead of anguish and regrets, the retrospect brought her an unspeakable bliss, a

foretaste of her heavenly reward. She saw herself in her bridal veil the day she gave herself to God, when she founded her huge family of poor, wretched, and forsaken ones; when she boldly took up the burden of others' misery and weakness in addition to her own. She had never laid it down; she had carried it till now, when she was sinking under its weight.

It was a fitting end for the soul which had been faithful unto death. She saw herself driven out of the "Providence," deprived of her habit, of her privileges, of her beneficent influence, persecuted by some, driven away by others—an outcast even from her own home; and she smiled at the thought of this perfect realisation of her vow of poverty and humility. All was changed. Pain had already become joy, and apotheosis had begun. Then she saw the last vision of all—the poor wretch who, on his dying bed, had begged her to save him. All the gloom which had so enfolded him was turned to radiant light.

"I was able to do that too; it was perhaps my highest work." In greater want than the poorest, more forsaken than the guiltiest, she who had soothed so many

dying beds, had no one at her pillow, and could summon no human help. It was as it should be. She repeated: "I want nothing for myself!" Her only regret was for those who would grieve so bitterly.

"My dear little Sister Cécile! My poor Yvonne!" But she could not dwell on even those thoughts now. It was time to turn to God, and to Him alone.

Then that soul which here below had loved so much, rose from earth, and was drawn upwards into the bosom of Eternal Love.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LAST TASK

It was by accident, at Bockay's, that Robert du Plessis heard of Sister Alexandrine's death. As he passed by that morning, he had called in to pay a bill. Crossing the first-floor show-rooms, he saw Madame Doynel on her way from a fitting ; she stood by a model costume, talking to Madame Bockay. Though she did nothing herself in the shop, Mathilde often came down, knowing, as a practical woman, that the eye of the mistress is even better than that of the master. She could not lose her interest in the things which reminded her of her early training. She was experienced, and took a new and more complex pleasure in her dealings with her customers. A rich woman would like to be in society, but for this it is not enough to have secured a fortune or even a husband. The wisest thing for the rich Madame Bockay, since she could not get

into the great world by the open gate, was to try and make sure of the side door; and instead of giving herself airs, to try and attract all the ladies who would not receive her in their houses, but who were quite willing to have almost intimate conversations with her in her own rooms, more magnificent than many in *the* Faubourg.

As Robert du Plessis took off his hat to Madame Doynel, whom he knew, Madame Bockay nodded politely to him without interrupting her conversation with her customer—

“Poor Sister Alexandrine!” she repeated, “to think of her dying alone like that, after helping so many! I met her only a short while back, and then I thought her very altered. She had too much to bear! One may be a nun, and yet not be able to bear being turned out of one’s house, obliged to alter a whole life and give up work and friends. It is as if we women in the world were robbed of our houses, husbands, and children.”

Madame Doynel turned to Robert du Plessis, who had stopped, apparently to listen.

“We are talking of a poor Sister of

the 'Providence,' who was found dead in her bed."

"Sister Alexandrine? I knew her," said the young man; "my mother was very fond of her."

The conversation grew brisker now there was a listener.

"I was at the eviction," pursued Madame Doynel; "it was a sight I shall never forget. I never saw such a crowd or such a demonstration. It would have taken very little to make it into a street fight. Is it not strange that, after making such a fuss over the nuns and protesting so energetically in their cause, people should lose sight of them and take no further steps till one fine day there comes the news of a death?" She perceived that she was implicating herself, and was determined, for her own part, to atone as far as possible for her careless neglect.

"Madame Bockay, did you say that the funeral is to be this morning? Where will it be?"

"At St. Germain-des-Près."

"At what time?"

"At twelve; I am going." Madame Bockay took the opportunity of drawing

herself up in her very elegant black dress ; it was one of the firm's triumphs.

Madame Doynel's attention was attracted. She noticed the costume, and then looked down at her dark grey tailor-made coat and skirt.

"I would go, only I haven't time to change."

"Oh, Madame, you needn't change," declared Madame Bockay with commercial authority. "It is not as if it were a grand society funeral. There will be all kinds of people ; no one will notice details—and who is there to see? No relations."

"Still nuns have relations like other people," remarked Robert du Plessis, who felt he ought to say something, and could not make up his mind to go. As he joined in the conversation, Madame Bockay included him in her remarks.

"Sister Alexandrine happened to belong to a very good family ; she was a D'Arcilly. I saw it on the invitation."

Robert gave a slight start. He remembered the day he had received and turned her away.

"Were those the D'Arcillys who had a

château near Chartres? A splendid place where I have often stayed for the hunting with the De Prielles," he explained, turning to Madame Doynel.

"Yes, they are those D'Arcillys," said Madame Bockay, who knew absolutely nothing about it, but who thought her answer did honour to the memory of her benefactress. She thought it sounded well, too, for her to have had such aristocratic friends, and, even in her youthful days of poverty, to have been nursed by a great lady from a country château where there was hunting.

"I shall go to St. Germain-des-Près," said Madame Doynel, now quite decided. "As you knew this poor nun, Monsieur du Plessis, shall I take you? The *coupe* holds three, and my husband is waiting for me downstairs."

Robert never saw any one else make a resolution without wanting to imitate it. This time he felt glad to indulge one of the generous impulses which sometimes moved him; they were not strong enough to wake his conscience, nor to break him of his bad habits and uproot him from the life he was leading.

Without further demur, he allowed himself to be carried off by Madame Doynel. He was even more moved than that young woman, who cast backward glances at the costume models on view, as she left Bockay's shop.

After which she and Madame Bockay each went in her own carriage to Sister Alexandrine's funeral. It was a very plain one. The parish hearse stood outside the old porch of St. Germain, and inside the church, which was not draped with black, was the crowd of people of all kinds prophesied by Madame Bockay, standing behind the coffin with its few little wreaths. The crowd was not in any way marshalled or classified. A master of the ceremonies would have been puzzled what to do. Who were nearest to Sister Alexandrine? The sick, the infirm, or the poor; orphans or forlorn old people? On the left were some very plainly dressed women, wearing dresses as shabby as Sister Alexandrine's old black one; they were easily recognisable as the former nuns of the "Providence," with a gap in their ranks left by the absence of poor little Sister Cécile, whose salary did not

allow of her taking a return ticket. Then there were faces familiar in the past, the remnant of the boarders and employés of the "Providence," who had not been swallowed up by the parish cemetery.

Then shoulder to shoulder with these sat the benefactors of the Convent; many had been neglectful until now, and insisted on making reparation like Madame Doynel and her neighbour, a stout, consequential looking woman, with grey hair, evidently an important person on committees. On her other side sat Madame Henry's old mother, her head shaking with palsy; she looked utterly bewildered. She had managed to get to the church somehow, and, as she looked at the coffin, she reflected that the next funeral she came to would be her daughter's.

Behind the gentlefolks and the poor, giving way to both, sat those few parish nuns who had been spared. They had made a point of coming with their orphans, They were deep in thought under their cornettes, reflecting that their turn would come next, and seeking courage and example in the coffin before them.

Robert du Plessis, coming late, remained

at the bottom of the aisle. Psychologist as he was, he began watching types and attitudes, and drawing deductions. Then he fell to analysing himself. Better than any one, he recognised the strange contradictions in his own nature.

"I refused that poor woman's request—I almost turned her out. Now I am here to do her honour—I might say to ask her pardon. Why? Because she is dead. Does death, then, totally reverse the order of things? Is that the same as saying that to see things as they really are, we must think of them as if everyone were dead, and we about to die ourselves? Nuns and monks have no other view or object in life. It was with thoughts like these that old Sister Alexandrine left Arcilly in her youth, and she never saw cause to change. If she had trouble to bear, she never knew that indecision of soul which is almost the worst of all mental ordeals. Death itself did not disturb anything in her life, for she had always faced it. Was she right? I cannot tell. At any rate she was not more in the wrong than others, than I myself, for instance. I feel there is nothing real

in me; I cannot attach myself to anything; nothing satisfies me; I don't care to live, and I am afraid to die."

This fear invaded him afresh, as he listened to the "*Quando Judex*."

"I have wasted my life," he reflected, "and I am not even happy. I am perhaps one of the most unhappy people here to-day." His eye again swept the rows of bowed heads, and stopped at a crape veil which covered a slim, young figure, shaken with sobs. "There's a woman who looks pretty miserable!" he thought. "I believe women suffer more than we do. What can be the matter with her? People don't break their hearts like that over the death of a nun, nor wear such deep black. It's widow's mourning." He looked again at the slim, elegant figure. "She reminds me of Yvonne."

Yvonne! Always the same memory; even when it escaped him, he sought to revive it. How many women had attracted him, because he fancied they had a look of Yvonne! Even Madame Doynel just now, because of her blue eyes and dark hair; but her face had a common expression that

banished the resemblance, and already he was looking for it elsewhere, as if by a just expiation he was condemned vainly and sadly to pursue the spectre of that happiness which he had allowed to escape him.

"That young woman really is like Yvonne."

The service proceeded. Under the Romanesque arches of the roof, chants, prayers, sad thoughts, pious aspirations, and distractions, all rose together into the air round Sister Alexandrine's coffin. Robert du Plessis did not take his eyes off the crape veil in the second row from the altar. They rose for the offertory. As he passed the coffin, his thoughts returned to the dead woman. He noticed a little bead wreath with an unusual inscription, one which is never seen—"Pray for us."

"They are right to ask for her prayers," said Robert; "she was a holy woman." And, mechanically, he repeated, "Pray for us!"

As he went back to his seat, he passed close to the chairs reserved for the female members of the congregation. The woman in the black veil rose in her turn. She

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did not see him, but he had recognised her—he noticed the widow's white cap inside her bonnet. Robert du Plessis did not return to the back of the aisle; he remained hidden among the crowd of men by the coffin. Had the dead woman prayed for him already? She had certainly brought him there. "You will regret it one day!" When she said those words, she had been thinking of Yvonne, but she could not speak plainly, for she was alive then, and the living dare not speak the whole truth. Only the dead can be so bold, and, through the humble coffin-lid and the parish pall, Sister Alexandrine's heart spoke freely to that other heart which had been so closed against her in this world. She reproached Robert with betraying and profaning love, and at the same time proclaimed the power of that love which alone could redeem him. She convinced him that he had destroyed his happiness on the day that he broke a heart, and that the only way to regain peace was to build up the lost happiness of another. She told him all she had tried to say when her lips were sealed, all that she had tried to write to him

when her hand turned to stone. She said it so much more convincingly now, that he was ready to listen and obey.

Suddenly he fell on his knees in the shadow, hid his face, and sobbed. "Can I indeed still atone?"

"Yes!" A voice from the unseen urged him. From the pure flame, which had been Sister Alexandrine's soul, there still radiated a fire that could inflame the repentant heart, dispel cowardice, and revive the flagging will!

The congregation was leaving. The crowd dispersed—a few solitary cabs followed the hearse to the cemetery. When all was over, and poor Yvonne had turned from the resting-place of her last friend, she was so blinded with tears under her crape veil, that she did not distinguish the features of the man who came towards her through the winter mist. He was obliged to speak.

"Yvonne!"

Then she knew him. She was so bewildered that she did not know how she was greeting him, nor what feeling was uppermost in her poor, storm-tossed soul.

"Yvonne, it is Sister Alexandrine who

has sent me. In her name I implore you to hear me and to trust me, if that is still possible. Only tell me what has happened, and to what fate I left you."

He could not be lying if he invoked Sister Alexandrine; he could not be deceiving her, and she did not refuse to answer: "I have been dreadfully unhappy. Now I can forget my sorrows in my little child. She will be my earthly happiness."

"I shall have no more happiness in this world."

She had nearly said that he deserved none, but she checked the words on her lips. Then she suddenly grew angry.

"Why have you come back? I wish to be a stranger to you. I am not the girl you knew. I am a poor widow, a poor mother, working to support my child."

In her earnest endeavours to disenchant him, he found the proof he sought. She had not forgotten him. Poor, without that bloom of girlish innocence which had so charmed Robert long ago, she was more touching now than ever. Had not a little of Sister Alexandrine's soul gently pervaded his own? Had he not caught a

spark of that love which is charity, and which suffering attracts and inflames?

"Yvonne," he said, "neither am I the man I was. I will become worthy of you. I can feel now that it is possible, and then perhaps, one day, you will forgive me for the sake of SISTER ALEXANDRINE."

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